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Becoming and Being: Atheism as a Social Experience in Egypt

Research project for masters of Arts In anthropology
Wael o. Al Soukkary

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Faceless. Happy now?

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Chapter One Introduction

1. Introduction

Egypt ranks among the highest countries in the perceived importance of religion to its population. Around 98% of Egyptians have professed that religion is particularly important in their lives (Gallup, 2010). This sentiment is expressed in legal documents such as the constitution declares in the second article that “Islam is the religion of the State and Arabic is its official language. The principles of Islamic Sharia are the main source of legislation”. Furthermore, the state actively prosecutes individuals whose behaviour in some cases is deemed as “acts of debauchery, defamation of religion and violation of public morals”. If, indeed, impiety and irreligion, and by extension atheism, are frowned upon by both the state and society how could we understand atheism as a social experience in Egypt? Why have some individuals, despite the centrality of religion to socialization and the potential grave consequences, turn into atheism? Furthermore, how do these atheists situate themselves in Egyptian society and particularly how do they cope with the stigma associated with atheism? The state's role as a vanguard of public morals and religion as well as the population's heightened sense of religiosity creates the need for many Egyptians to devise ways by which their religious identity is negotiated in the everyday and on special occasions vis-à-vis their desired lifestyle and. This need is further intensified by the diversity of values within the Egyptian culture, exposure to globalization and relative allowance and acceptance of different lifestyles and occasional or permanent changes in behaviour. This research will attempt to answer these questions by exploring some of the pathways to atheism and the various coping mechanisms that are employed by some Egyptian atheists to function in society to avert or confront social backlash.

2. Background

The Visibility of Egyptian Atheists

There are several indicators to the persecution of Egyptian Atheists in Egypt. Firstly, several outspoken

Egyptian atheists are legally charged with “defamation of religion” which could amount to sentencing of 5 years in prison. In September 2013 The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) released a report, entitled *Besieging the Freedom of Thought*, which documented 63 new cases of defamation of religion. This figure marked a 100% increase compared to the figures of blasphemy cases prior to the 2011 uprising. Targets of these cases includes atheists and Christians as well as Muslims who are outspoken against mainstream Islamic discourse. Secondly, several media outlets have outlined outspoken Egyptian atheists as a “phenomenon” that requires confrontation and intervention. This media outcry amounted to a state response by which a campaign to “battle atheism” was officially launched to counter the ideas of Egyptian atheists. Official religious institutions spokespeople in charge of the campaign have proclaimed that atheists are a threat to Egypt's national security and are agents of foreign agendas to destabilize the Egyptian society. Accordingly, atheism in Egypt is proclaimed to be as much of a threat to the Egyptian society as radical and militant Islamists. Finally, the personal experience in the everyday details of the lives of some Egyptian atheists reveal a substantial hostility and discrimination if their atheist identity becomes known.

The January 2011 uprising marked a significant shift in the targets of anti-blasphemy cases where more and more individuals are dragged to courts over their views and opinions about religion. In December 2012 Albert Saber, a blogger and a cyber-activist, was sentenced to three years in prison by a court that found him guilty of defamation of religionⁱ. On October 2013 Sherif Gaber, a young university student, was arrested for creating a Facebook group that allegedly propagated atheismⁱⁱ. Karam Saber an author, was sentenced to five-years in jail after being found guilty of defamation of religion over his book “Where is God?”ⁱⁱⁱ – A collection of short stories. On October 2014 Ahmed Harqan, an outspoken atheist, was detained in a police station in Alexandria with his wife after they went to report an assault by an angry mob which recognized him from a TV appearance where he was critical of Islam. The couple, who were released the next day, reported that policemen harassed and insulted them during

their stay in the station. A few of lawyers have declared that they are already preparing a blasphemy case against Harqan for the views he expressed on TV and online^{iv}. On December 2014, Cairo's Abdeen directorate raided with the police what they identified as an “atheists cafe” and shut it down after receiving complains that atheists gathered there. ^v

Several Atheist Facebook groups, Twitter accounts and YouTube Channels that appeal to Egyptian audiences have been created after January 2011 with different approaches and goals. Some of these online activities are specialized in particular topics or themes such as promoting scientific explanations of the world, mockery of religion, rational discourse or connecting atheists to each other. In addition several atheists have appeared on private TV channels to debate their views or their position in society with other guests, usually Azhar scholars, as well as TV hosts. In short, there is an undeniable unprecedented surge of Egyptian Atheists who are actively engaging with their society to promote their beliefs, promote scientific world-views, defend their rights or generally criticize religion. In some cases critique of religion extends beyond rational or constructive criticism into mockery and insult to religious symbols and values.

This surge has been met with gradual outcry on Egyptian media with one particular TV host, Muhammad Moussa, vowing on his show *Redline* on Honest TV channel to “expose” Atheists who “sabotage” religion. Mustapha Zakariah, an activist and atheist, proclaimed on Moussa's show that while he is not interested in mocking Islam, he is striving for being accepted as an atheist by his society. Nevertheless, Moussa demanded that Zakariah is detained and executed as a punishment for his atheism. Amin Ezz Al-Din, Alexandria's Security Directorate chief, said on the same show that a special police unit is being planned to arrest openly vocal atheists who are active on Facebook. Inviting atheists to TV talk shows has become a frequent reoccurring spectacle with the discussion usually turning into a loud and frantic confrontation and, occasionally, the host kicking out or ridiculing their atheist guests. In addition, and perhaps prior to confrontation on the media, several Facebook groups

and pages have also been created to counter atheists' activities on Facebook with several aims such as attempting to open a dialogue or demanding that the government takes action against Egyptian atheists with these demands ranging from initiating a modern religious discourse to arrests and execution. The outcry culminated in a state sponsored “campaign to battle Atheism” initiated by the Ministry of Youth, Ministry of Sport and Ministry of Endowment on June 2014. Naemat Sati, the director of the campaign, announced that a group of psychiatrists, sociologists and religion scholars will engage Egyptian Youth to curb the phenomena and “get atheists back to their religion^{vi}”. The Minister of Endowment, Mokhtar Gomaa, also accepted a proposal by Al-Azhar scholars to launch a program to train Imams and youth on refuting atheism, “curing” atheists and “raising awareness of its [atheism] dangers to morals and the nation”.^{vii}

Demography of Religion in Egypt

Egyptians are predominantly Muslim with around 80 to 90% of the population ascribing to Islam with a sweeping majority adhering to Sunni Islam. However, the umbrella of Sunni Islam in Egypt includes diverse expressions of the faith including numerous Sufi orders, Salafi groups, the Muslim Brotherhood, followers of televangelists, official state institutions such as Al-Azhar and Dar Al-Ifta, , an official state institution that issues fatwas, as well as nonaffiliated millions of Egyptian Muslims. Qur'anists, a sect that only adopts interpretations of the Qur'an and denies the authenticity of the *Hadith* (sayings) attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, is known to exist without any means to identify their numbers. While there are no official records about the numbers of Egyptian Shia Muslims, it has been estimated that there are at least around 1 million Egyptian Shiites.

Most of the remaining Egyptians, an estimation of 10-20% of the population, ascribe to Christianity who mostly belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria with the exception of an estimated 600,000 Christians that are more or less equally divided between the Coptic Catholic Church and Protestant Church. In addition there are small Baha'i and Jewish communities with an estimated

membership of 2,000 and 200 people consecutively. The state only officially recognizes the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and therefore it is difficult to estimate the number of adherents to other religions or the number of irreligious Egyptians since they are not counted in the official census of Egypt. There are, however, some statistical indications that irreligion is uncommon in Egypt. According to a 2009 Gallup poll 100% of Egyptians proclaimed that religion is an important part of their daily lives. There is at least a margin of error of $\pm 4\%$ in addition to sampling errors and other difficulties in conducting the poll that might produce a bias in public opinion representations. The Gallup poll is in line with a 2013 Pew poll that shows that 84% of Egyptian Muslims are in favor of the death penalty as a punishment for leaving Islam and that 95% of Egyptian Muslims are in favor of Islam playing a large role in politics. Such views highlight the stigma associated with irreligion in Egypt and, consequently, the added difficulties with quantifying Egyptian atheists and agnostics who may prefer to keep their religious views confidential to protect themselves from legal prosecution and social stigma. Despite these difficulties Dar Al-Ifta proclaimed that there are only 866 Atheists in Egypt as part of the official state campaign and statements to “battle atheism”^{viii}.

Defamation of Religion in Mubarak's Era

To begin to understand the state's reaction to public discussion about atheism in Egypt, it is important to first acknowledge that hostility towards proclamation of irreligion or publicly disagreeing with mainstream religious discourse is not recent. Acknowledging the relatively recent history of religious persecution in Egypt is important because, firstly, it dispels the exclusiveness of Egyptian atheists' struggle with the state. Secondly, and more importantly, it contextualizes hostility towards atheism in Egypt within a bigger frame of state policies and public sentiments towards the practice freedom of religion and the use of the public space accordingly. In other words, the state regardless of the political climate at any given time has been more or less consistent with its vigilance against dissidents of

mainstream religious discourse. In fact, many parallels could be drawn between instances of violation of freedom of belief post January 2011 and the former president Mubarak's regime. For example, blasphemy cases that reached a peak during the Islamists' rise to power have many precedents during Mubarak's era. Naawal El Saadawy, an outspoken controversial Egyptian feminist who was once imprisoned by President Sadat in early 1980s, was accused of defamation of religion in 2007 after publishing an article entitled "God Resigns". Nasr Hamd Abu-Zayd, a prominent Islamic studies professor and a liberal theologian was found guilty of apostasy in 1995 by an Egyptian appeal court and was accordingly forcefully divorced from his wife since, according to Egyptian laws, non-Muslim men can't marry Muslim women. Despite viewing himself as a Muslim, his interpretation of the Qur'an and particularly inventing a humanistic hermeneutic view of Islamic texts offended fundamentalists and Islamic radicals. Ahmed Sobhi Mansour, a Muslim history professor, was expelled from Al-Azhar University in 1985 due to his views over the authenticity of the sayings attributed to Muhammad the prophet of Islam. In 1987 he was tried and imprisoned for 6 months. Farag Fouda, a professor and an influential critique of Islamism, was assassinated by *Al-Gama Al-Islameya* in 1992. According to a statement by the group, his apostasy, advocating the separation of religion and state as well as defending Egypt's legal system rather than implementing Sharia law justified his assassination. Before he was killed, Al-Azhar accused him of blasphemy echoing a fatwa issued by Gad Al-Haq who accused Fouda of being "an enemy of Islam". Seen by some observers as moderate interpreters of Islam, neither Al-Azhar nor the Muslim brotherhood condemned the assassination. Muhammad Al-Ghazaly, an Azhar scholar and a prominent Islamic reformist, argued in the trial of Fouda's killers, where he was summoned as a witness, that apostasy is punishable by death and that the "Imam" (the Egyptian state leader in this context) has failed to apply Sharia by not punishing Fouda himself. More than 20 years later, Muslim brotherhood candidate Muhammad Morsi proclaimed during his successful bid for presidency in an interview on CBC, a private TV channel, that apostates are "corrupted" and that "ailed

body parts should be severed from society”. While in Egyptian laws apostasy is not a crime, it has legal repercussions such as in the case of terminating Abu-Zayd's marriage or imprisonment of Mansour. Defamation of religion, if associated with apostasy in the court, would amount to similar legal repercussions. In short, free-speech and freedom of religion could endanger the lives and the liberty of Egyptian citizens who cross the line set by, otherwise, conflicting groups. This has been the trend regardless of the conflict between the state and Islamists. Just as in the case of Mansour, Fouda and Abu-Zayd who all identified themselves as Muslims, other Muslims and particularly members of Sufi orders often find their festivals and ceremonies tightly regulated by the government with the consent of Al-Azhar and hardliner Islamists alike. Criminalizing dissidence and/or challenge to mainstream religious discourse carried on post January 2011 revolution only with a slight significant change; the targets of prosecution were no longer exclusively public figures.

Defamation of Religion Post 2011 Uprising

In September 2013 Ishaq Ibrahim of The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights presented a report entitled “the siege of thought” documenting 63 cases of defamation of religion since the January 2011 uprising. This time period covers both the transitional phase under the rule of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces' rule as well as president Morsi's one year reign that was ended by the military after massive protests. According to Ibrahim many of the defendants are facing trials over opinions expressed on social media or at their work place. EIPR claims that the defendants are denied their rights to due process as their lawyers sometimes find it hard to get to the trial on time as crowds of people purposefully block the entrance to the court. EIPR also claims that some judges are often “nonobjective” by resorting to the maximum punishment allowed. EIPR's report is in line with an Amnesty International statement on June 2013 that warned about the increase in blasphemy cases against bloggers, media personnel and Christians. The amnesty report also criticized the state's inability to properly protect the defendants' right to due process. The continuous increase and rise in blasphemy

cases is a reminder that the ideological differences and political hostilities between the state and Islamists as well as between different Islamist groups are somewhat blurred when it comes to freedom of belief and freedom of expression.

Freedom of Religion and Sectarian Violence

The state is not the only contender to freedom of religion and its free expression. Egypt has witnessed quite a few instances of sectarian violence which reached its peak in the aftermath of Morsi's ouster in 2013. After the Egyptian police violently dispersed the armed protest camps organized by the Muslim Brotherhood in Rabaa and Nahda squares in Cairo, at least 30 churches were destroyed or looted by angry mobs. Many private properties, schools and shops known to be owned or run by Christians were also targeted and attacked. Almost a year and a half prior in an event publicly known as the Maspero Massacre, 28 people were killed and 212 were injured by security forces and the military on October 2011. The deceased were mainly Christian protesters who were reacting to the destruction of a church, claimed to have been built without a license, in Upper Egypt. On that night, Rasha Magdy a broadcaster at the national TV, called on the air upon "righteous citizens" to help and protect the army from "angry Christian protesters".

Violence against Christians and the state's failure to offer protection also has precedencies in Mubarak's era. On January 2000, a dispute between a Christian merchant and a Muslim spiraled into massive riots in Al-Kosheh, a village in Upper Egypt. Al-Kosheh is largely populated by Christians who own most of the shops that serve neighboring Muslim agricultural villages. Local authorities exercised almost no effort to control the situation which spiraled into the systematic burning and looting of hundreds of Christian owned shops and houses. 21 Christians were killed, mostly in the agricultural fields owned by Muslims. Furthermore, according to a Daily Telegraph report, several Christians who were arrested were also harassed and tortured in the police stations.

Christians, however, are not the only sect ever to be antagonized by angry bloodthirsty mobs. In June

2013 and during Morsi's reign, a group of Egyptian Shiites were targeted by an angry mob that premeditated a deadly attack^{ix}. The mobs torched Shiite houses and killed a few people including Sheikh Hassan Shehata who was a prominent Shiite religious leader. While many of the perpetrators were later arrested and sentenced to prison, this event highlighted the increasing hostility and rejection towards a fragile and peripheral Shiite minority. Similarly in 2009 during Mubarak's era, several Baha'i families were also targeted by angry mobs who torched their houses to force them to leave their areas^x. The state was not impartial to the plight of Egyptian Baha'i as the Ministry of Interior positioned itself as an opponent to their appeal to Egyptian courts to recognize their religion in national ID cards in 2006.

So far through this historical overview I've been attempting to establish two points: (1) the systematic violations of religious freedom in Egypt and (2) that such violations hardly differentiate between people who identify themselves as Muslims, Christians, Baha'i, Shiites or Atheists. Indeed each case has its own specificities such as, for example, Egyptian Christians having the advantage of being recognized by the state and being supported by an official religious institution or that atheists and Shiites could easily choose to become more or less invisible or that Baha'i were at one point recognized by the state and could allude to the rights they had not so long ago. However, it should be noted that any discussion or study about a religious marginalized sect or an individual should be contextualized within the recognition that society that has experienced numerous episodes of hostility towards freedom of religion. In other words, the case of Egyptian atheists, is not an exception to an otherwise a tolerant state or society.

3. Conceptual Framework

Religion

Any discussion about atheism is intrinsically also a discussion about religion. Studying atheism as a social experience also invokes an investigation on the implications of religion on socialization and

particularly the formation of identity, values and knowledge about accepted modes of behavior. As discussed earlier in this chapter, irreligion is highly uncommon in Egypt and most parents would typically, with varying degrees, attempt to socialize their offspring religiously. Furthermore, religion is greatly imbricated with the state's discourse about political organization, public morality, citizenship and perhaps the very nature of the state itself. The very fact that both the Egyptian state and general political climate are largely invested in religion blurs the lines between the private and the public aspects of religion. In addition, the significant importance and centrality of religion in Egypt to its population incites us to consider that belief and internalization of religion is a social property as much as it is individualistic.

The discussion in these terms invokes the debate between Clifford Geertz and Talal Asad on the meaning and attributes of religion. The debate could be outlined by a basic question; is religion merely a system of beliefs and symbols or is it a product and an instrument of power relations that are shaped by the broader social, cultural, economic and political context?

Geertz (2000) defines religion as a “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the mood and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (90). In a sense what Geertz is trying to accomplish with this definition is to draw attention to the process by which religion influences and shapes human action by imagining a supernatural order of the world that is projected on all details of the human experience. To Geertz this could only be accomplished by understanding the system of meanings that is embedded within the symbols constituting religion. Accordingly, and only then, are we able to relate religion, as a system of symbols, to individual psychological processes as well as the social and cultural contexts. In short Geertz is arguing for a theoretical separation between symbols and social events where the former is theoretically “abstractable” from the latter (91). In other words, Geertz is arguing that the meanings of

symbols and, accordingly, the power of interpretation are not only pivotal to understanding social action but also supersede exploring religion in relation to its broader context.

Conversely, Talal Asad (1993) argues that defining religion as a system of symbols and meanings is conceptually flawed on several grounds. Firstly, Asad argues that religion doesn't have an "autonomous essence" and accordingly meaning is not intrinsically embedded within religious symbols (28).

Therefore, Asad argues that, contrary to Geertz's assertion, there can be no universal definition of religion not only because of the historical specifics but also because that any definition is "the historical product of discursive practices" (29). Accordingly, Asad argues that Geertz's definition is specific to Western and modern Christianity particularly because of Geertz's "primacy of meaning without regard to the process by which meanings are constructed" (43). Asad's critique highlights his dissatisfaction with the assertion that meaning and social events could be theoretically abstracted and separated. Asad insists that conceptualizing religion could not be separated from the questions of power and historical specifics that shape the meanings attached to religious symbols. Therefore, Asad proposes that religion is a "discursive tradition" that cannot be conveniently separated from other aspects of social life and is rather imbricated with manifestations and exercise of power in all social domains (28).

Based on the discussion above there are three aspects that must be synthesized with our conceptualization of religion while at the same breath avoiding a universal or fixed definition. Firstly, religion is political and the separation of church and state is conceptually flawed. Secondly, in line with the first observation, religion is part and parcel of the public sphere. In other words, we're invited to think about religion as not just merely beliefs and symbols but also both a product and a producer of the larger social, political and economic context. This involvement and imbrication with the public sphere extends to personal articulations and expressions of religion by which the individual carries the duty (or the burden) of maintaining, reproducing and abiding by the social order and his subjectivity. Thirdly, religious belief and behavior are not separate categories of analysis but are rather intertwined

in a way where belief motivates and develops behavior. Coincidentally, behavior is a barometer and a reflection of belief that is constantly expressed and tested. This is not to say, however, that impiety necessarily disenchant or dispels society's perception of a given individual's religious identity. On the contrary, just as society also develops ways and techniques of reproducing and enforcing public morality, it also devises ways by which impiety is regulated and even largely tolerated. In other words, religion is imbricated with both piety and impiety that, to some degree, one could not be conceptualized without the other.

The Pathway to Atheism

The pathway to atheism, or becoming atheist, describes the overarching combination of variables such as cultural influences, socioeconomic status, life experiences, ideas and emotions that predispose individuals to atheism. The term may seem to imply that becoming atheist is a linear process from one point, such as belief or at least experiencing religious socialization, to another final point; disbelief and atheism. However, in application, the term is intended to highlight that conversion to atheism is a fluid process. Furthermore, it intends to highlight that along the "pathway" there are several factors and experiences that make becoming atheist an imaginable possibility and a conceivable perspective on, at least, the natural world. Conceptualizing conversion to atheism as a pathway with several interplaying variables and factors invites us to avoid reductionist explanations of atheism as a social experience that amplify the influence and role of one variable over the others. It also invites us to consider that becoming atheist is a significantly individualistic experience that corresponds to some of the unique details of the lives of individuals who forfeit religion and turn to atheism. In other words, the pathway to atheism encompasses different variables that, when combined and overlapped, make atheism a conceivable and imaginable viable and relevant world-view.

Religious Socialization

Religious socialization is the process by which individuals learn and acquire the religious beliefs and

religiously inspired values, modes of behavior, world-views and sentiments. Conceptualizing socialization into different clear cut categories, including religious socialization, is not meant to ignore the imbricative characteristic of the process where multiple discourses and agendas often overlap and even contradict each other. Instead it is meant to draw our attention to the significance and centrality of religion within a particular familial context and the consequences of it. Accordingly, we also need to account for the possibility of the varying degrees of centrality and significance of religion within the family and in the process of socialization rather than imposing it on the discussion as a fixed categorical analysis. Therefore, my examination of religious socialization within the family will particularly entail how individuals transform into atheism despite, or as a result, of the varying degrees of intensity of religious socialization.

Biopower

Biopower describes the means by the state regulates and controls its subjects through a plethora of ways to subjugate their bodies (Foucault, 1977). Manifestations of biopower includes birth control, classifications of mental and physical illnesses, public health policies, body alterations and dress codes. Accordingly, I will examine how the body becomes a site of religious cultural formation. I will particularly address the consequences and the influences of biopower, when applicable, on the individual experiences of atheists whether before or after their turn to atheism. Additionally, employing biopower invokes a deeper examination of the imbrication of the state's social agenda and the family's desires and expectations for their children. By doing so we would also be able to account for the dynamic influences of state control as well as the reproduction of religious knowledge within the family on the development of atheism as both an identity and a world-view.

Cultural Hybridity

Cultural Hybridity is the notion that there are expressions and elements of culture that are not historically or geographically intrinsic. Accordingly, these expressions and elements of culture are a

product of globalization and particularly the consequences of overseas employment, free flow of information, world trade and displacement. Cultural Hybridity invokes a non-essentialist or authentic conceptualization of a particular culture that considers its multi-faceted, overlapping and possibly contradicting elements. Accordingly, I will examine cultural influences other than religious socialization and particularly the implications of globalization on identity formation and lifestyles. This is crucial to building a better grounded and more rounded understanding of how individuals develop their desires, emotions, ideas and beliefs. By doing so we would also be able to account for the dynamics and repercussions of the interplay and tension between different discourses and their influences on identity formation.

Coping Mechanisms

There is a significant stigma that is associated with atheism that renders atheists as morally inferior, corrupted and dangerous. The repercussions of being identified as an atheist could incur social banishment and legal prosecution. Consequently, many atheists may often find themselves in a position where they need to manage their identity vis-à-vis the potential repression and backlash associated with the terms of social placement of atheism. Coping mechanisms describes the different strategies by which atheists manage their identity generally or in particular social contexts. Accordingly, I will examine ways by which atheists position their atheist identity among other the identities that they've acquired. By extension I will also examine how this positioning influences their behavior and their own placement in their social world.

The (Im)pious City

The discussion on coping mechanisms will also involve conceptualizing public space as both a frontier of religious cultural formation and a medium of identity negotiation and accommodation of alternative lifestyles. The (Im)pious City describes the fluidity of civic life in relation to social arrangements pertaining to religion that regulate social behavior and recreate the broader contexts of social order and

public morality. This fluidity and flexibility is employed by a large segment of Egyptians, including atheists, to find avenues where the social expectations dictated by religious identities become loosened and less restrictive.

The Savage-Slot

Trouillot (1991) calls for anthropologists to critically analyze and contextualize the present anthropology which must be seen as a product of a history that includes, both, “the history and prehistory of Anthropology” (Fox, 22). The prehistory of Anthropology that Trouillot deems is necessary for proper critical analysis and contextualization of the discipline is the history that “starts with the emergence of symbolic feud that made formalization of Anthropology possible” (Fox, 23). This feud started with the emergence of Christendom as Europe and the rise of religious intolerance as Abrahamic religions struggled over the Mediterranean and Spain which, and as a result, put politics, ideologies and the notion of order “high on the agenda” (Fox 31). This notion of order, to make sense, is contrasted and put against *Utopias* (the exotic or different others) which essentially requires what Trouillot calls the savage slot.

4. Methodology

This research attempts to study the variety of ways by which some Egyptian atheists experience and respond to the tension between appropriate social behavior and religious beliefs vis-à-vis their own desires and ideas. Consequently, there is not a particular group under study and I will make no claims of representing Egyptian atheists.

For security and social reasons it is difficult to locate Egyptian atheists let alone convince them to participate in a study regardless of the steps taken to conceal their identity and protect their privacy. I will, thus, rely on snowball sampling.

An important point to clarify is that while there are philosophical differences between agnostics and atheists, they will both be included in my research. The main reason I think this is acceptable is that the

differences between both is not recognized by the state's public discourse since simply not believing in God or having doubts practically puts them under the category of atheism. My methodological approach will ensue to answer a basic question; how are atheist identities formed, negotiated, concealed or purposefully amplified in a restrictive social and an increasingly volatile political contexts?

The research will include both a library research as well as elements of ethnographic research that will entail participant observation in three local cafés where a group of friends, largely atheists, gather every couple of days to socialize. In the library research I will be strictly employing secondary analysis of qualitative and quantitative studies that are related to the topic of research. I will also conduct a discourse analysis of the state's campaign to battle atheism with emphasis on the relationship between the state and its religious institutions and the political context through which this campaign operates. I will save no effort or take any chances on protecting the rights, lives and privacy of my interlocutors or subjects of study. I will, accordingly, ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of my interlocutors. All names of my interlocutors will be randomly coded in the field notes. Any information that has a potential of revealing the identity of my interlocutors will not be used in the research. Furthermore, all my interlocutors will be told their rights prior to the interviews and no coercion or financial/social leverages or other means of exploitation of any social vulnerability will be exercised to compel them to participate. I will encrypt all the documents and files in my personal computer which I will have the sole access to.

Chapter Two

The Body and the Family: Religious Socialization and Resistance to Embodied Cultural Formations

1. Introduction

The family is the first primary orchestrator and source of socialization. Verily the broader culture, religion, the media, educational institutes, the judiciary system and the state may overlap, influence, override and, conversely, give away to the socialization process through the family. Nevertheless, because the family is the most immediate and first social interaction avenue for individuals, it's pivotal to begin any investigation on the formation of identity, beliefs, values and modes of behavior through an examination of the process of socialization through the family. This is particularly because it could offer us insights on the very first clues as to how individual become who they are and how their identities are then accepted, integrated or regulated by the family as the first social frontier of the formation of cultural and moral values. On a similar note, and particularly with the question on the regulation of beliefs and identities, the body represents a relevant and necessary field for investigation. As it will be discussed in the literature review and based on interviews with my interlocutors, the body is highly involved with cultural and identity formation since it's both a medium of socialization and resistance. Furthermore, the implications of cultural embodiment are particularly significant on the development of atheist identities in Egyptian upper middle class settings. To establish the theoretical and conceptual framework for my analysis on the accounts of my interlocutors' pathway to atheism through religious socialization and resistance to the embodiment of culture, I will review some of the literature on both issues upon which I will proceed with the discussion.

2. Review of the Literature

Religious Socialization and Formation of Religious Identity

The family as a social unit is of a fundamental and critical influence and importance in people's lives.

After all, the individual's first social experience is with members of his family. The family's socioeconomic status, core values and structure is not only pivotal to socialization but could also alter and define the ways by which an individual experience the broader social world. Furthermore, the different types and quality of familial relationships; cohesion, adaptability and communication; have a significant influence on the individual's quality of life (Lamanna, Reidman and Stewart; 2012). The family could also be perceived as a political project of the state through which citizens are trained and raised to acquire desired standards, attitudes and beliefs that accept and facilitate cooperation with the political system. Take for example the Soviet Union's anti-religious campaigns from 1928 to 1941 that promoted atheism and actively persecuted entire religious communities and families (Timasheff and Kolarz, 1963) or the United States' intervention policies that enforce compulsory schooling and welfare payments to families (Becker and Murphy, 1988).

Sociological and anthropological literature on religious socialization in the family are abundant and are conceptually established in the canon and consequent studies. There has been a growing interest however since the 1970s in sociological and anthropological study of socialization and irreligion to address the largely overlooked implications of apostasy and disbelief on related social issues that were typically perceived and analyzed through the social study of religion (for ex: Brinkerhoff and Burke, 1980; Caplovitz and Sherrow, 1977; Welch, 1978). In their Study of Canadian college students, Caplovitz and Sherrow (1977) argue that there are four main factors that predispose individuals to become apostates or disbelievers. The four factor are poor relations with parents, neurosis, radical political orientation and commitment to intellectualism. Caplovitz and Sherrow also frame apostasy as an act of rebellion against parents due to dissociation and poor quality familial relationships. Brown and Hansberger (1984), however, argue that none of these factors have been empirically substantiated or supported (239). Instead, Hansberger (1983) argues that the level of centrality and relevance of religion in the family is the most important factors that predisposes individuals to become apostates or

nonbelievers. This is highlighted by Hansberger's later study of Australian college students which demonstrated that apostates are more likely to be living away from their childhood home (241). Hansberger's argument sits well with previous studies that concede that religious development is significantly tied to the parental religious orientation (for ex: Hoge and Petrillo, 1978; Johnson, 1973; Strommen, 1963). Similarly, Hart Nelsen (1990) argues that there is a clear correlation between the family's religious socialization and the individual's religious beliefs where 84% of the children who grew up with parents who had no religion became disbelievers themselves.

Review of the Literature: Embodied Cultural Formation

For a very long time in social sciences the study of the body was strictly considered an exclusive domain for natural sciences. Keat (1986) contends that while social scientists have invested much time and thought on the peculiarity and uniqueness of mankind, they appeared to have no qualms with the presumption that the human bodies were mute and not particularly relevant to social research (127). Positivism, rationalism and the rise of scientific inquiry compelled social thinkers to think of the body as simply an object that is separate from social awareness and cognitive interaction with the social world. However, a paradigm shift ensued in the 1970s as more social scientists paid closer attention to the ways by which the body and sociocultural phenomenon such as rituals, gestures, expression of values, politics and power, to name a few, are related. Rendering the body as a social phenomenon in the 1970s has roots in earlier researches of anthropologists and social thinkers that were slowly breaking away from the body-mind and nature-culture dualities that dominated western thought for centuries. Durkheim (1965) proclaimed that "man is double" where there is an observable differentiation between the organic natural body and the "socialized" body that acquires significant moral and cultural attachments (52). Mauss (1935), along similar lines, argued that the physical, cognitive and social spheres were imbricated and overlapping and, thus, demonstrated that everyday uses of the body are intertwined with and consequential to specific and temporal cultural practices

(172). Hertz (1973) argued that differences in moral and ritualistic ascriptions of the body in many cultures, for instance dignifying the use of the right hand, are constructs and representations of “the structure of social thought” (58). Durkheim, Mauss and Hertz studies on the employment of natural symbols associated with the body to recreate social structure and social order exposed the relationship between these social constructs and the body. This paved the way for an explosive plethora of literature and research on the body and its socialized characteristics where, accordingly, the use of natural symbols associated with the body was argued to be a representation of both group inclusion and unity as well as exclusion and hierarchy (Douglas, 1966, 1970; Hugh-Jones, 1979; Ngubane, 1977; O'neil, 1990). Furthermore, social constructs and categories inscribed on the body through tattooing, adornment, clothing and hairstyles was argued to be associated with placements in the social, political and moral worlds of human groups (Alford, 1991; Biedelman, 1968; Boddy, 1988; Holmes, 1979; Kennedy, 1970). This increased newfound attention at the time to the social characteristics of the body is illustrated by Ellen (1977) who proclaimed that researchers need to acknowledge the interdependence and overlapping of the “the cerebral, the material and the social” (370).

This paradigm shift, however, limited conceptualizing the socialized body to the mere reflection of social arrangements and constructs with not much attention to the links between knowledge and practice in relation to individual conceptualization of meanings ascribed to bodily practices or the relation between body, power and resistance. At the heart of these social problems, in relation to conceptualizing the socialized body, is the question of the formation of subjectivity; the juxtaposition and overlapping of perception, emotion, desire, judgment, self-placement and self-awareness that shape and influence both subjects and their actions. Marleu-Ponty (1962) argues in the *Phenomenology of Perception* that the dualism of the body and the mind is not how humans experience their social world and that, instead, we should develop complex, multi-layered and dialectical concepts of social consciousness and self-awareness. Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty thinks of the body not as a mere object

but rather as an “expressive space” where we can identify meaning and importance of behavior and social action (146). Conceptualizing the body as an “expressive space” and identifying embodiment as a characteristic of values and meanings bridges the aforementioned gap between thinking of the body as a reflection of social arrangements and the formation of subjectivity.

The work of Merleau-Ponty inspired Pierre Bourdieu to conceptualize the transformation of the physical and biological body into a “distinctive body” that could be like “a machine, to be tuned and serviced and improved wherever possible” (Benson, 141). Conceptualizing the body as a machine does not allude to the employment of biological bodies or bodily symbols by a lucky minority for profit or social gains as discussed earlier by Hertz. Instead it highlights the widespread use of the body by a majority of people through very specific mechanisms to garner social gains. Essentially this renders the body as not just a biological object or as an individual subset of the self but also, and more importantly, as a social construct that belongs to both the individual and the society.

Bourdieu (1991) argues that the body is the “visible manifestation of the person” which includes values, character, beliefs and presentation of the self (367). Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that manifestations of the body are developed and shaped by “the internalized structures, dispositions, tendencies, habits, ways of acting, that are both individualistic and yet typical of one's social group” or what he collectively calls “habitus” (Oliver, 114). The notion of habitus is particularly significant in addressing the gap between conceptualizing the socialized body and the formation of subjectivity because it highlights both the internalization of personal affinities and the social structures that shape it. We could, accordingly, not only think of the body as a pool for mining information about social facts or internalized meanings of action, which is important, but also as a space where power is exercised, grievance is expressed, identity is negotiated and socialization is processed. Michel Foucault (1991), looking at the body as a space for exercising power, coined the term biopower to describe the ways by which nation states regulate and control their subjects. This is realized through “an explosion of

numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of population” such as heredity control, public health policies and classifications of both mental and physical illnesses (140).

Several studies, building on the body as a space for both the appropriation and recreation of social order, values and knowledge, emerged. For example, Boddy (1989) argues that women in of the Hofriyat village in Northern Sudan are made into “living vessels” of their culture's values and beliefs through the practice of female genital mutilation (16). Aihwa's (1989) study of female workers in Malaysian factories who are allegedly possessed by spirits revealed, however, that through the performance of becoming possessed (a bodily affliction) these women are able to protest dire working conditions, low pay and sexual harassment without fear of punishment or other negative consequences to their livelihood (28-42). Similarly, Abu-Lughod (2002) proposes that the Burqah for Afghani women serves as a “portable seclusion” that helps women maintain their society's standards of modesty and, thus, their own ability to carry on with daily business (785). In these instances we are presented with the employment of the body as a negotiator where the terms of social placement that restricts public activities of women are relatively mitigated and lifted in exchange of the recreation of social order and moral values through specific codes of dressing.

3. Pathways to Atheism: Loose Religious Socialization and Apostasy

While it's quite uncommon and very rare to find an entire family in Egypt with parents who consciously raise their children secularly, there are cases where religion is not central to the upbringing of children and socializing them. Based on the literature on the relation between socialization, the parents' religious orientation and apostasy we already know that predisposition to apostasy or disbelief is largely shaped by the level of centrality of religion to the family. Hansberger (1983) stipulates that the low significance of religion in socialization and child upbringing is the most significant factor in the disposition to apostasy. Accordingly, it's not a surprise that some of my interlocutors reported that they

have experienced what I describe as “loose religious socialization” which basically means that religious socialization is largely marginalized in the family.

For instance, Hunter, a medical professional in his mid-thirties, recalls that religion was just not in the picture either for him or in the way he was raised. He fasted during Ramadan and occasionally attended the Friday prayers but other than that religion was not something his mother spoke off or encouraged him to follow despite being a believer herself. Hunter recalls that, in addition to the marginalization of religion in his upbringing, he wasn't attached to religion from the start and didn't have a religious zeal or interest. Occasionally, and during hardships, Hunter used to pray and thought that going through them was a blessing from God but that never materialized into a commitment to religion. Nevertheless, he self-identified as a Muslim well into his twenties. There were times when a close relative at his age was upset that he didn't pray with him but he recalls that his reluctance to pray was not due to do a conscious choice but rather because he “simply didn't feel like it”. Eventually, Hunter adopted a festive lifestyle where he would socialize in bars and pubs which involved regular consumption of alcohol and premarital sexual relations, both of which are extremely frowned upon and perceived as grave sins by Islam. Interestingly, Hunter recalls that his Mother was not the least concerned and not even once complained or advised him to change his lifestyle despite knowing about his activities.

Loose religion socialization, however, doesn't necessarily dictate the ways by which individuals think about or express religion. Layth, Hunter's brother, an educator in his early thirties, describes quite a different experience. Like Hunter, he recalls that religion was never an important part of his upbringing. In fact, Layth recalls that their mother was rather reluctant to teach them about religion and was defensive when other members of their family tried to approach them about religion because she was afraid that they'd become radicalised. “I was particularly vulnerable to radicalism in my mother's perception because I was interested in religion during my childhood”, Layth told me. While Layth was not formally educated about religion, other than the classes he attended at school, he would spend time

with his grandfather learning how to recite the Qur'an. Unlike Hunter, Layth was more keen on performing prayers and observing religious traditions. "I was never conventionally religious. I prayed and fasted but also listened to music, watched western movies and played video games. I was also quite sceptical of the legitimacy of religious interpretations that were presented in school or in the Friday sermons" he explained. Accordingly, Layth thinks that he constructed a peculiar religious identity by which he was interested in observing religious rituals but was also at the same time coming up with very individual conclusions and ideas about religion. For instance, Layth believed that it was consistent with Islam that salvation was not exclusive to Muslims, that women should enjoy absolute equal treatment with men and that there should be no limits or constraints on personal liberties based on religion. In a sense, Layth's experience breaks away from Hansberger's stipulation that it's highly likely that children who are not religiously socialized are more disposed to apostasy. At the same time, however, it reveals a different way by which loose religious socialization can influence the religious identities of individuals. Loose religious socialization in Layth's case, and instead of turning him to apostasy, allowed him a space to form an individualistic understanding of religion that is relatively independent and, as we will see later, conflicting with mainstream religious discourse. This conflict, as Layth recalled, was one of the most influential gateways to scepticism and eventually abandoning religion which indirectly fits with Hansberger's argument since loose religious socialization has allowed the possibility of constructing a fundamentally different religious identity from the mainstream regardless of whether or not it was maintained.

To sum up, loose religious socialization in the two cases I've mentioned has allowed two possibilities; adopting an "impious" or alternative lifestyle and constructing an individualistic and non-mainstream religious identity. I will return back later to the cases of Hunter and Layth and try to explain and analyse how eventually their situations developed into a conflict with faith. At this point, however, and to further develop my analysis, I will explore a different outcome and possibility of loose religious

socialization. Joe, a banker in his late twenties, says that like most upper middle class Egyptians, he comes from a “moderately Muslim family” that has strict beliefs and commitment to observing basic Islamic rituals such as attending the Friday prayers and fasting. Nevertheless, his family did not actively and particularly encourage him to pray and to learn and read the Qur'an. In a sense, to Joe, religious socialization was something that is implied and in the “background” rather than being central to his upbringing and his every day. While Joe remembers that he felt some pride in his Muslim identity he also always felt alienated in the Friday prayers. Joe was upset with what he calls “strong political overtones” in the sermons that divided mankind into the camps of believers and heretics who earned and deserved God's wrath and damnation. Joe was also dissatisfied with the topics of the sermons for what he deemed as “propagation of irrelevant issues when society obviously needs some serious reforms”. Most importantly to Joe, however, was a dissatisfaction with religious explanations of the world which he thought were “weird stories, absurd supernatural views, historical inaccuracies or whichever shit that you hear when you go to a sermon”. Accordingly, as Joe proclaims, because religion was not particularly significant in his upbringing, he was already developing negative feelings and ideas about religion early on in his childhood. In fact, during the interview, Joe found it very difficult to reflect on when and how exactly he started feeling antagonism towards religion. “It's like it was almost always this way for me. I just never felt comfortable with religion or with being in a mosque” Joe told me. Simultaneously, Joe was interested in non-theistic and scientific explanations of the natural world such as the theory of Evolution. Interestingly, however, that was well-before he self-identified as an atheist or decided that he had abandoned religion. Joe recalls that science was, at some point, “definitely a strong factor” in abandoning religion and faith in God. “The world made more sense to me than before” Joe said to me. Nevertheless, exposure to scientific explanations of the world was not the point of departure from religion for Joe but rather a significant variable that justified it later on.

There are two observations to make at this point. First, Joe's case, once again, exemplifies a position where loose religious socialization opens possibilities of alternative ways of thinking and perceiving the world. Second, like Hunter and Layth, there seems to be a readily available alternative avenues, values and world-views that both shapes and accommodates the different ways to think or behave. Additionally, pertaining to the second observation, Layth's account on his mother's concerns about him potentially becoming radicalised if he is exposed to religion raises an extremely significant question; what cultural motives was behind their mother's concerns and, equally as important, what other alternatives did his mother approach in socializing and upbringing him if not based on religion? Layth's account of his mother's concerns, Joe's turn to scientific explanations of the world and Hunter's access to clubs and bars highlights the need to consider the broader sociocultural context of upper middle class Egyptians and its impact on the levels and intensity of religious socialization.

To sum up this section we can make the following argument, loose religious socialization predisposes individuals to apostasy by two means. Firstly, by allowing the possibility of adopting alternative lifestyles that doesn't comply with religion. Secondly, by allowing a space for individuals to develop ideas and world-views that are independent from mainstream religious discourses. Since predisposition doesn't imply necessity, loose religious socialization, despite being a significant variable, cannot solely explain transformation into atheism. This is particularly because, through examining the accounts of my interlocutors, it has become clear that influences outside the family need to be accounted for. For example, the availability of avenues where alternative lifestyles can be adopted and practised and the pervasive influence of ideas and values that made my interlocutors feel uncomfortable with mainstream religious discourses.

4. Pathways to Atheism: Moderate Religious Socialization and Apostasy

If indeed children are more likely to follow the orientation of their parents especially if religion is central to socialization and upbringing, how do we understand the other cases of my interlocutors who

have reported that their parents were keen on socializing them religiously? This is perhaps an opportunity to once again stress on the overlapping and multiplicity of variables and reasons my interlocutors have abandoned religion. It could also be the case that significance of religious socialization was overemphasized in past studies or is diminished in different contexts. Moreover, it's an invitation to problematize "religious socialization" as a categorical unit of analysis as it is clearly plausible to speculate that religious socialization varies in intensity and approach from one case to the other. For the purpose of this research I use the category of "moderate religious socialization" to describe the centrality of religion in socialization through active encouragement to observe religious rituals and traditions however without violence or intense conflicts. It seems, at least from my encounter with my sample, that it's more common for atheists to have experienced religious socialization rather than not.

For instance, Helios, an engineer in his early twenties, recalls that his parents hired a sheikh to teach him about religion and how to cite the Qur'an which implies that, despite not being uncommon, his family went an extra mile to socialize him religiously. Additionally, his family also actively encouraged him to perform the five daily prayers and to attend the Friday sermons and prayers. Based on the literature on religious socialization, we should be able to speculate that, with such emphasis on religion, Helios is unlikely to be predisposed to apostasy. However, Helios recalls that he was actually not religious at all during his early childhood and teenage years. For instance, Helios says that he would run away from the lessons of the sheikh his parents hired. While this may seem and could simply be a child trying to escape a chore to do more interesting and fun activities, Helios recalls that he was agitated from the Qur'anic verses the sheikh was instructing him. For example, Helios says he never quite understood even as a child why, as per Islamic Shariah, inheritance is not divided equally among men and women. Early on in his childhood, Helios seems to have possessed a sense of scepticism towards religion and disconnection from its rituals. This feeling persisted in his high school years when

his best friend, who was religious, took him to prayers. “I never used to feel anything and didn't know why” Helios recalls. Nevertheless, Helios says that he continued to observe performing the prayers, at least occasionally, to please his parents and “because it was what he was supposed to do”. During his college days, Helios travelled to perform *Omra* with his mother hoping to reconnect with religion in the holiest of places in Islam. “I sincerely did everything I was supposed to do and still didn't feel anything. The idea that Islam is a valid religion started crumbling” he told me. Helios's account seems to imply that, despite the significance of religion to his family, he experienced a disconnection from religion early on in his childhood. It's interesting that Helios cited an internalization of a conflict between his values, as for example equality for women, and what he was being taught by mainstream religious discourse whether in school, the mosque or the sheikh. We are accordingly, once again, incited to investigate the influence of alternative value systems and beliefs that, in the case of Helios, seemed to override religious socialization.

Similarly, Alison, a teacher in her thirties, experienced a sense of disconnection from religion later on in her life. Alison comes from what she calls a “conventional” Egyptian family that encouraged her to be a “good Muslim” which to her family meant to observe religious rituals such as fasting and praying as well as wearing the veil. By the time Alison was 18 she got veiled, performed the five daily prayers, memorized the Qur'an and joined religion lessons in a nearby mosque. Alison recalls that her religiosity was stemmed from a need to “find some peace of mind” as well as a sense of obligation to pleasing her parents. Being a “meticulous perfectionist”, as Alison describes herself, she often found herself under pressure to “do everything right”. Accordingly, she started feeling tired and mentally exhausted instead of relief. As she turned twenty she went with her family to Mekka to perform *Omra* in a bid to reignite her commitment to religiosity but instead felt “suffocated and disconnected” throughout her time in Saudi Arabia to the extent that she was counting the days to get back to Egypt. When she came back to Egypt she recalls that she was doing a lot of effort to be closer to God but it felt to her that she was in a

“one sided relation”. “I was not getting anything in return. This effort made me even more anxious and dissatisfied” Alison told me. One day Alison was praying and while in the middle of prayers she suddenly unfolded the rug and asked herself “what am I doing?” and she never prayed again since that day. It wasn't until she abandoned religion that Alison started questioning Qur'anic verses, people's beliefs and world views. Alison says that she felt that the scripture didn't make any sense and wasn't speaking to her to the point that she was questioning how she got immersed in religion in the first place. “We are asked to care for the most mundane of things. Why does God care if I cover my foot or not while I am praying? This makes no sense at all” Alison said to me. Once again based on the literature we should speculate that the centrality of religion to her family and her religious socialization would lead her to become immersed in religion. However, on the contrary, becoming strictly religious was the undoing of her belief and seems to be the source of disconnection from religion. However, “disconnection” from religion seems to be quite abrupt to be an explanation for radically shifting gears from observing piety and immersion in religion to flat out disbelief and atheism. There are two clues that Alison alluded to in our conversation. First, the disconnection that she felt was a result from “not having a peace of mind” despite strictly following and observing religious rituals and tradition. Second, Alison proclaims that the “first order of business” once she abandoned religion was to take off the veil and “pursue the things that really made me happy and satisfied”. For example, shortly after Alison decided she was no longer going to adopt a religious lifestyle, she formed a rock band and started performing in concerts. This may seem like a radical shift, and indeed it is, however, the question is; had Alison been, perhaps unconsciously, bottling her desires and interests in compliance with her family's religious socialization? If this is the case, it could be an explanation to the seemingly abrupt “disconnection” from religion and the radical change in her lifestyle. But even if that is the case, where did this come from or, in other words, what is it that has eventually overridden her religious socialization? Alison has recalled that while her parents actively encouraged her to be a “good Muslim”

they also allowed her to own American pop music cassettes, hang posters of boy bands in her room and hang out with her female friends without supervision in malls and sport clubs. What I am alluding to, once again, is that while religious socialization is important, it also often becomes diminished in the face of other influences and particularly the consumption of cultural products such as arts and the exposure to alternative world-views and value systems.

So far we've observed that moderate religious socialization could sometimes be overridden by alternative values, as in the case of Helios, or by the lure of an alternative lifestyle, as in the case with Alison. We've also observed that there is a significant need to consider these powerful influences that come from outside the family's desire to socialize their children religiously.

Eric, an entrepreneur in his early twenties who was born into Christianity, had a similar experience of disconnection from religion. However, to Eric, the gateway to apostasy apparently started for material reasons rather than spiritual ones. Eric holds a dual nationality with an Arab country where he spent most of his childhood before he came back to Egypt in his early teenage years. During his childhood he became involved with church activities and by the time his stay outside Egypt ended he was part of a church choir as well as an acting group. Eric's family encouraged his commitment to church activities as they were quite invested in religion themselves. At the height of his religiosity early in his teenage years, Eric joined a retreat with his young church group where they played games and attended sermons. The retreat was designed as some sort of a rite of passage where youngsters are encouraged to be “true believers” and not just Christians by name. The central theme of the retreat was to commit to being “a good Christian” and observe the example of Jesus in everything they do in their daily lives and particularly to obey their parents and not slur or cheat. Eric recalls that this retreat made him feel “filthy” and in need of repentance which reignited his commitment to religion and being a good Christian. At the age of 16 Eric wanted, pretty much like most upper middle class Egyptians, to have a mobile phone and a PC which his family was reluctant to buy. Eric, being a “good Christian”, prayed to

God to give him the things that he wanted but to no avail. Unsatisfied with God's "negligence" of his prayers, he expressed his frustration to his priest who told him that "God is not an ATM machine" and that God always has a hidden wisdom that he should look for and observe. Eric, dissatisfied with his priest's answer, started growing scepticism towards the nature of God who doesn't answer the prayers of his followers whether for the mundane material things or serious life afflictions such as disease. This led him to question one of the most basic tenets of Christianity; the original sin. "Why have I descended to Earth and have not been given a chance like Adam? Who is to say that I would not have acted differently and why should I be treated with a punishment for a sin that I've not done?" Eric recalled his line of thought. Eric's case displays an interesting dilemma where, if we were to reconstruct his account, becoming a good pious Christian didn't seem to warrant the rewards he expected and, accordingly, he grew sceptical to religion upon which he later started questioning the tenets and beliefs of Christianity. The question is, however, what could account for Eric's apparent pragmatism? Furthermore, could we explain Eric's case purely on individual qualities? Indeed, Eric doesn't recall that he had experienced any problems with religious values or beliefs prior to this incident. We could speculate that Eric's dissatisfaction with religion is merely symptomatic to underlining variables and particularly the desire, similar to most upper middle class Egyptians children, to own gadgets and the expectations children have from their parents when they comply with their desires and beliefs. In other words, while Eric maybe a pragmatic person as he describes himself, the consumption of expensive goods and gadgets which is a staple for upper middle class Egyptian families seems to be the overarching stimulant of Eric's conversion. Eric also questioned his religious beliefs and, therefore, I am not making the point that Eric turned to apostasy because he failed to acquire material goods but rather that religious socialization in this particular case failed to offer incentives for the observance of religious rituals and piety. In fact, upon further digging, this was a spiritual conflict at heart because as I've mentioned earlier, Eric felt that the doctrine of the original sin implied that he was "filthy" and

devalued as a human being. Furthermore, as Eric recalled, he was taught that, regardless of how “good” he is, he will always be a sinner in the eyes of God and that only Christ's sacrifice can redeem him. Perhaps it was this feeling of worthlessness rather than pragmatism that incited him to eventually turn to apostasy as he was unable to reap neither spiritual fulfilment nor material rewards from his parents despite his commitment to the church.

To sum up this section, it appears that moderate religious socialization in the family, while most certainly significant, is embattled with outside influences that, when internalized, they may potentially override it. The most significant manifestation of this tension is the sense of “disconnection” from religion that my interlocutors have reported despite the centrality of religion in their families and their immersion in religious rituals and observance of tradition. Therefore, while Hansberger's argument may account as to why atheism is uncommon in Egypt, since religious socialization is indeed pervasive and widespread in Egypt, it doesn't explain why individuals coming from fairly religious families have transformed into atheism. Furthermore, so far at least, it seems that Caplovitz and Sherrow's stipulation that poor parental relations, neurosis, radical political orientation and commitment to intellectualism predispose individuals to apostasy could not be substantiated through the experiences of my interlocutors. On the contrary, all of my interlocutors so far have actually spoken in favour of their relations with their parents and have not expressed the slightest interest in politics or intellectualism at least at the time they were still committed to religion. These accounts highlight the need to consider other variables that shape identity and religiosity outside the family if we are to reach a better understanding of atheism as a social experience in Egypt.

5. Pathways to Atheism: Cultural Embodiment and Resistance

So far I've presented cases where religious socialization, despite the varying levels of significance, has not incited or sparked significant conflicts or tension between my interlocutors and their parents. All the cases that I've examined up to this point have demonstrated that they were either not interested in

religion to begin with or that they were, more or less, immersed in it themselves. The latter cases particularly have reported positive parental relations and highlighted a sense of “disconnection” as the main cause of their apostasy, which as I've argued needs to be examined further through variables other than the family's influence. I've encountered two cases, however, where the enforcement of religious socialization has not only sparked tension within the family but may have also directly contributed to the transformation into atheism.

For instance, Grace, a saleswoman in her late twenties, recalls that she was constantly under pressure from her family early in her childhood to be a “good Muslim”. What that meant at this early age for a female child was to pray, fast, wear modest attire and obey her parents. Nonetheless, Grace said that despite her parents’ wishes for her, she was never comfortable with religion whether in the classes she attended at school or at home. Furthermore, despite the encouragement from her parents and the requirements of school curricula, she particularly refused to memorize Qur'anic verses. Grace couldn't frame why exactly she felt this way towards religion because, as she puts it, “it happened a life time ago”. However, given the immense pressure from her family, her feelings and actions even at this early age could be perceived as some kind of unconscious resistance to adopt a lifestyle she wasn't attracted to. In fact, this speculation seems to be more plausible based on later developments as her body began to mature after puberty. As expected and enforced on most Muslim girls hitting the age of puberty in Egypt, Grace wore the veil upon uncompromising demands from her parents who wanted her to be a “good Muslim woman”. Grace recalled that she wore the veil on-and-off with each time signifying important underlining assumptions and processes that we need to consider and examine. Let's start with the beginning; why is it that her parents insisted that she wears the veil right after she reached puberty? In her parent’s perception, as Grace proposes, that was a necessary obligation and a definitive requirement for becoming “a good Muslim woman”. In a sense, wearing the veil serves as a rite of passage into “womanhood” that doesn't only symbolize piety but also the acceptance of social

regulations and restrictions on sexuality. This is remarkably similar to Boddy's study on women in the Hofriyat village in Northern Sudan where he argues that cultural values, social order and beliefs are embodied through the practice of female circumcision. The implications and symbolism of wearing the veil, as Grace says, is something that she was very aware of and "loathed" which put her in a fierce tension with her family when she decided to take it off during high school. Furthermore, Grace insisted that she on buying and wearing clothes that her parents deemed were "inappropriate". In response her parents would tear, burn and throw away her clothes in a bid to force her to comply with their perception of the Islamic standards of women's attire. Additionally, her parents continuously grounded her so as long as she insisted on "going out indecently" according to Grace's recollection of their arguments. What we are being presented here is a case where the body is a significant frontier both social regulation, the embodiment of culture and resistance. Perhaps it's through Grace's experience that we could also understand why Alison, in her turn, immediately took the veil off once she started having doubts in religion well ahead of adopting an alternative lifestyle or turning to atheism. On a similar note, Layth recalled that he was dismayed by the negative categorization of his mother's piety and moral fabric, according to mainstream religious discourse, because she didn't wear the veil. In a sense, Layth's increasing alienation from mainstream religious discourse that incited him to develop his own understanding of religion and his later turn to atheism could be perceived, at least partially, as an intellectual and emotional resistance to society's projection of its values and standards on his mother's body. Interestingly, however, Grace says that she, with her own accordance, wore the veil once more when she joined college. "Putting on the veil enabled me a significant freedom away from my parents restrictions who would have otherwise expected me to come back home right after I finished my lectures in college" Grace recalls. Therefore, in a sense, what Grace is saying is that while she didn't want to conform to "appropriate Islamic clothing" she nonetheless identified within it a lease on greater freedom which operates similarly to the concept of "portable seclusion" that Abu-Lughod proposes in

her study on the Burqah and Afghani women. Relating that to transforming into atheism; I am not suggesting, nor did Grace, that the battle over her body is what caused her to become atheist but rather that it was a significant experience that may have influenced her later on. In fact, Grace attributes her atheism to a traumatizing experience during her days in college. On one fateful day Grace took a cab and was on her way to visit a friend when the cab driver drove her to a remote area and started assaulting and sexually harassing her. When Grace resisted the cab driver he took out a knife and threatened to kill her if she doesn't do what he pleases and ordered her to “suck his dick”. He took her to an empty building under construction and forced her to do what he wanted. After keeping her for a couple of hours he made her take off her clothes and tried to penetrate her. Grace's resistance made matters worse and was met with severe beating. Grace's attempts to reason with the cab driver where to no avail but her resistance prevented the cab driving from being able to penetrate her. In the process Grace says she lost her virginity as the cab driver penetrated her vagina with his fingers. In the end of the ordeal the cab driver took off and left her in the building shaken and traumatized. Grace reflected on her experience and recalled praying to God as the rape was happening and was angry on what she perceived as God's abstaining from saving her at the time. “I was told that this was a trial from God but I was skeptical of this explanation. Why would God test me when he already knows the results of this test? Why does an all knowing God want to test me? It was over for me” Grace told me. However, a question begs an answer; why did Grace become atheist as a result of this ordeal? Could she have reacted differently given that some other individuals' ordeals serve to reinforce their beliefs rather than shake them? In fact, while Grace was angry with God and skeptical of his existence after this ordeal, she didn't completely lose faith until she started conversing with an atheist friend over the Internet about her ordeals and ideas which, after sometime, materialized in atheism. At the same time her earlier experience and desires to adopt an alternative lifestyle other than that of the “good Muslim” were both justified and amplified. There are three points to be made that could develop our understanding of

Grace's turn to atheism. First, once again, we are presented with an outside influence, in this case conversing over the Internet, as a pivotal point on a pathway to atheism. Second, we need to account for, and hence investigate, the allurements and even the mere existence of potential alternative lifestyles that hindered cultural embodiment and interrupted religious socialization from taking its course. Third, Grace's ordeal highlights that understanding transformations into atheism must, when appropriate, account for significant individual and critical life experiences.

Most studies on cultural embodiment and resistance in Muslim societies is primarily focused on women and piety (Abu-Lughod ; 2002, Deeb; 2006, Hafez; 2011, Mahmood; 2005). However, as Foucault argues, biopower or the subjugation and control of the population through their bodies is socially universal and cross-gendered. Regulation and cultural embodiment, as it relates to religious socialization, is manifested in Jackson's case, a 19 years old college student, who faced a similar situation as that of Grace with her family. "Religion is central to my family and I was strongly encouraged to perform religious rituals, not to do wrong things such as smoking or lying and to take God in account with everything I do" Jackson said." At the age of 15, when Jackson was at the epitome of his religiosity, he encountered a family friend, whom he later found out was atheist, and discussed his beliefs with him. "These discussions made me curious and sceptical and so I decided to start researching the question of God's existence online. After a short while I started to identify with atheism and joined a closed Facebook group for atheists that further reinforced my scepticism" Jackson told me. When his family found out about his ideas, a tension quickly rose and he was in daily conflicts with his family who tried to change to his mind. Furthermore, Jackson's uncle took him to a psychiatrist and was prescribed anti-depressants and other medicine to "cure atheism". It's quite grimly revealing that Jackson's family would associate doubts in religion with mental illness or that a professional psychiatrist would, accordingly, attempt to "cure" it with medicine. Similarly to the battle over Grace's body, we are presented with a deeply pervasive and radical manifestation of the length "safeguarding"

religious system could go through practices on the body. While Grace's case presented the enforcement of cultural embodiment through the regulation of attire and Boddy's study on Northern Sudanese women presented it through bodily alterations by the practice of female genital mutilation, Jackson's experience with his psychiatrist introduces medical practice and authority as a medium by which biopower is exercised. In a sense, the medical professional in the white coat was an agent of the overarching repressive sociocultural and political agenda against anyone who, for one reason or the other, left the confines of the "safety of the kettle". Jackson, under pressure from his family, took the pills but felt that he wasn't sick to be cured in the first place and that religion simply stopped making sense to him. The pressure from his family did not make him revert to Islam but rather pushed him to question it even more, become hostile towards its values and further develop his scepticism into atheism. The significance of Jackson's experience is that it, once again, highlights influence outside of the family and particularly his membership in an atheist group on Facebook. Additionally, like in all the cases that I've encountered, it challenges the presumption that individuals with loose significant socialization are more likely to become apostates. On the contrary, for Jackson and others, religious socialization was overridden by other influences, personal experiences and critical life events. In fact, only three of my nine interlocutors have claimed that religion was not central to their family with one of them, Layth, developing his own individualistic understanding of religion rather than directly transforming into atheism. However, I am not stipulating that religious socialization is not significant but rather that, as a unit of analysis, it offers an incomplete picture and explanation of the formation of atheist identities. The significance of Jackson's case is that, similar to Grace, poor parental relations could be, at least case by case, considered for being a variable in the pathway to atheism as Caplovitz and Sherrow have argued. This is, however, not to say that positive parental relations necessarily implies that children would follow their parent's religious orientations. In fact, as I will discuss later, positive parental relations was capitalized by many of interlocutors to assert their atheism to their

families despite experiencing moderate and significant religious socialization.

To sum up this section we can make a few observations about the mechanisms by which strict religious socialization operates and is resisted. Firstly, strict religious socialization, more strikingly than other levels of intensity, involves a significant and an uncompromising enforcement of cultural embodiment. Second, while bodily regulation is an avenue of religious socialization it is, also, an avenue through which resistance is expressed and restrictions on behaviour is negotiated. Thirdly, strict religious socialization, as with other levels of intensity, could also be overridden and challenged by influences outside the family where, at least, alternative lifestyles and ideas could be imagined and aspired to. Finally, while social research often motivates us, at least unconsciously, to focus on social issues, variables and units of analysis, we should also be careful not to overlook critical life events and individual experiences that may influence and develop the pathways to atheism.

6. Religion: Reciprocity and Subjugation

Embracing religion entails acceptance of restrictions, regulations and observance of rituals. Religion as evident in the accounts of my interlocutors, however, is not a one-sided relation. Many of my interlocutors have reported a struggle with a sense of disconnection from religion after, one way or the other, failing to harvest expected gains from observing religion. Based on my interviews I can divide these expectations into two categories; a functional and grounded world-view and personal support. By world-view I mean a cognitive predisposition that is based on a body of knowledge towards morality, social order, metaphysics, socioeconomic arrangements, world affairs and conceptions of universal truths. Foucault (1976) argues that each society has its own “regime of truth” which encompasses “the types of discourse society harbours and causes to function as true” (112). Accordingly, the “regime of truth” establishes, through religion among other institutions and mechanisms, world-views that reproduces and maintains the power relations that establish it. I will reserve further discussion on conceptualizing religion as a discourse for the following chapter after

accounting for competing and overlapping discourses. At this point, however, it's important to highlight that establishing regimes of truth, partially through religion, doesn't move in one direction. In other words, if for one reason or the other the regime of truth becomes irrelevant, escapable or questioned, religion by extension may also be caught in the crossfire.

Personal support, as the second outcome of the reciprocal relation with religion, encompasses social, spiritual and financial rewards that are perceived to be deserved for both believing and behaving accordingly. For example, Alisson expressed that despite a great effort in diligently behaving as required, she didn't experience a "peace of mind". Similarly, Helios expressed his frustration with constantly not "feeling anything" despite observing religious rituals and consciously embarking on an endeavour to experience spirituality. On another note, Eric was disappointed that obeying his parents and his commitment to the church was not translated into acquiring the gadgets he wanted from neither his parents nor God. Grace's account for her rape ordeal and her scepticism of God's existence after it happened reveals that to her having faith was expected to warrant a protection from God. All these accounts highlight the reciprocal nature of the relation between religion and believers that may largely undermine individual attitude and commitment to religion if not maintained. In other words, we can partially think of atheism as a possible development of the failed fulfilment of reciprocal claims and perceived entitlements by committed believers.

Our discussion on analysing the religious experience as partially a reciprocal relationship also invokes a discussion on regulation and control. Religion offers its adherents an encompassing world-view, an identity and group membership. At the same time it devises elaborate techniques of punishment and regulation that bestows its instilment and formation of subjectivity with the necessary arsenal to maintain and reproduce the regime of truth that a given society adopts. Grace's account of her family's severe backlash when she refused to comply with their desired standards of "proper" attire invokes us to think of the family as an agent of the state and the larger social order. Consider the incidents where

Grace's family exercised pressure by burning and cutting her clothes as well as financially constricting over her taste in clothing. Similarly, Jackson's family inclination to conceive his atheism as a mental illness and seeking a cure through medical intervention pinpoints that religion transcends the functional role of establishing individual belief systems towards a much broader and invasive role in relation to the organization of the public sphere. It's precisely at such conflicts that the family's role as a functional reincarnation of the state and a vanguard of the regime of truth is explicitly manifested. Consequently, we are inclined to conceptualize religion as not merely a system of belief and symbols as Geertz proposed but also as an institution that is part and parcel of the larger social and political context. Accordingly, we can also partially conceptualize manifestations of impiety, irreligion, and by extension, atheism as, at least, implicit resistance to terms of social placement, the regime of truth and biopower.

7. Concluding Remarks

Religious socialization, as observed in all of the cases I've examined, was overpowered by the outside influences such as the appeal of alternative lifestyles and values. Additionally, religious socialization was challenged within the family as a result of critical life event as well as resistance to control and regulation. Furthermore, and more importantly, we are incited to think of religious socialization in ways that take in consideration the reach and internalization of globalization to account for the accommodation of consumption of western cultural products in both socialization and the daily lives of upper middle class Egyptian families. In other words, I am arguing that while the significance of religious socialization may predispose children to holding their parents religious views, this argument falls short in explaining apostasy cases where religion was central in socialization. This is primarily because religious socialization varies in intensity and also due to the unaccounted outside cultural influences that may or may not override it. Conversely, it seems that religious socialization, at least in some cases, incites a different outcome than the desired observance of religious standards for behaviour

and establishing a religious identity. This seems to be the case particularly when individuals express interest and desire in adopting an alternative lifestyle that is shaped by the imagination of other possibilities of experiencing life. This could be due to other cultural influences and the imbrication of religious socialization, consumption of western cultural products, bilingual education and exposure to avenues for alternative lifestyles that are abundant in Egypt. Therefore, a closer examination of the broader culture and particularly the implications of globalization is due to further understand my interlocutors' pathways to atheism which will be the topic of the following chapter.

Chapter Three

Globalization and Atheism: The Implications of Cultural Hybridity and Cyberspace

1. Introduction

The first observation from studying the cases of my interlocutors so far is that there is not one single variables that shapes pathways to atheism but rather an assortment of variables that when combined reverting from religion and losing faith becomes a possibility. In the previous chapter I've begun to explore my interlocutors' pathways to atheism and particularly the role of religious socialization within the family in the formation of atheist identities. I have accounted for the different levels of religion's centrality to socialization in my interlocutors' families as well as the implications of these differences on how they formed ideas and emotions that shaped their attitudes towards religion. Furthermore, I've established that, when appropriate, we must also account for critical life events that may render atheism as not merely a social experience born out of broad social variables but also as an individualistic experience. Upon further examination there seems to be a common pattern in most of the cases I've looked at it which is not being to locate and accommodate individual values acquired within mainstream Islamic discourse as well as the appeal and, more importantly, the availability, of alternative lifestyles and ideas. This situation led some of my interviewees to a crisis of faith that was further reinforced by exposure to information and debates on Islam. Consequently, it's crucial to investigate how mainstream and alternative value systems/world-views are constructed and also why alternative lifestyles are available to begin with. After all, and despite religious socialization, alternative ideas and lifestyles are potentially pervasive to the extent that they may override the religious identity inherited from the family. While this chapter will closely examine these variables, we can make a preliminary argument; Egypt allows access to alternative lifestyles and ideas partially due to the organic diversity within the Egyptian culture as well as the ease of access to information that the

Internet and bilingual education enables for upper middle class Egyptians. In this chapter I will attempt to identify patterns in the stories told by my interlocutors that could, more or less, determine some pathways to atheism in relation to the broader culture and the implications of globalization. This analysis will be centered around the literature and studies on globalization and cyberspace in relation to the construction of cultural value systems and the formation of identities.

2. Review of the Literature

Globalization

Cultural anthropology since its development has been occupied with studying the social, cultural and economic characteristics *within* societies that are bound by these borders and territories. Consequently, culture has been represented as a distinctive and an isolated amalgamation of experiences, environments, histories, structures, values, beliefs, social relations and economic arrangements forming a closed, unique and specific system. The interdependence of global economy, transnational migration as well as the technological advancements in transportation and communication that intensified in the early 20th century increasingly blurred these borders and obscured the presupposed uniqueness of different cultures. Globalization, accordingly, could be conceptualized as the “social, cultural, economic and demographic processes that takes place within nations but also transcends them” (Basch, 11-12). Conceptualizing globalization has impacted anthropological theories and epistemological categories by breaking away from territorial and inherently specific understanding of culture and the different human experiences in the world (Kearney, 549).

This change in anthropological conceptualization of culture is owed to two major culturally overreaching developments in the modern global world. First, as the International Labor Organization reported in 1991, there were 100 million people who have been displaced and scattered outside their countries of origin due to conflicts, wars and poverty (A6). In effect, King (1991) argues that “culture has becomes increasingly deterritorialized” as more anthropologists became aware that millions of

people are no longer connected to their soil and neatly constructed borders. In a sense, viewing the world as a mosaic of separate and impenetrable cultures was no longer coherent and consistent, if it ever was, with the facts of transnational employment and population displacement that highlighted the development of an increasingly global world (Gupta and Ferguson, 7). Second, the deep and accelerated speed of the flow of information, ideas, images and arts has profound implications on the cultural traits of the presumably still bounded populations and groups. Sociocultural anthropological literature, recognizing the impact of the wild flow of culture, began conceptualizing themes and intellectual frameworks that could account for the diffusion and amalgamation of different cultures. These changes in conceptualization of culture resonated, furthermore, with the ways by which identity is understood and approached. Cultural hybridity (Bhabha; 1994), rhizome (Deleuze and Guatarri; 1987) and creolisation (Hannerz; 1992) are all concepts that all, more or less, propose that that are forms and manifestations of culture that are not historically or geographically rooted. Instead they are a result of exposure to globalization whose reach is identified by consumption of cultural products, overseas employment and displacement. Bhabha argues that, when contrasted with the givens of cultural hybridity, “essentialist claims for the inherent authenticity or purity of cultures which, when inscribed in the naturalistic sign of symbolic consciousness frequently become political arguments for the hierarchy and ascendancy of powerful cultures” (83). Bhabha's argument pinpoints the implication of conceptualizing cultural hybridity on not only our understanding of the concept of culture but also identity politics.

For instance, Ong (1993) studies Chinese overseas workers who increasingly “call into question not only stability in cultural identity, but also ties to a single nation state, or even to a single imagined community” (745-778). Cultural hybridity also has significant implications on our understanding of the formation of identity and the ways by which it is manifested and expressed. Traditionally, anthropology and ethnographic typologies followed a strict classification and categorization system that is

necessarily binary where individuals either are members of a group, nation and a cultural unit or not (Kearney, 558). Instead, Kearney (1995) proposes to replace the “either-or classification” with the “logic of both-and-and in which the subjects share partial and overlapping identities” (ibid). In effect, many anthropological studies and ethnographic literature conceptualized identity as a synthesis of overlapping variables such as political forces, cultures, contexts and socioeconomic statuses that are more elusive and flexible.

For example, Sherine Hafez (2011) argues that the divide between Islam and secularism/modernity is forced and one that needs to be avoided. Instead she suggests that both Islam and modernity are imbricated in a way that it is almost meaningless to speak of a dichotomy of values and that, in a sense, Islam and modernity don't only coexist but are also essential to one another. Hafez's research on Al-Hilal movement which is an organization run by women in Egypt highlights the complexity of identity formation away from the binaries of Islam (or even Islamism) and modernity. Women in Al-Hilal organization provide services for women such as day care, Islamic fiqh and literacy classes alongside other activities that aim to improve the economic conditions of impoverished women. Hafez's main goal is to try to identify the processes that “shape, shift, incite, and produce the desires and subjectivities of women in Islamic movements” (5). After all the claim for cultural specificity, as per traditional Islamic discourse which sees women as deficient and incapable compared to men, is challenged by such activism where women are actively impacting their society. The predicament is that there is no predicament since, as Hafez demonstrates, Al-Hilal women are engaged in a daily interactive and complex negotiation over Islamic, national and secular identities, discourses and methods (8). For example, while Al-Hilal women are sympathetic with an Islamic transformation of society they also insist that politics and religion ought to be separated which is an ultimately a secular value. Moreover, Al-Hilal women are engaged in structural arrangements and methods of activism that strikingly resembles that of western models of rational modern states.

Cyberspace

Anthropological research on cyberspaces is still in its infancy. Recently, however, the exploding popularity of social networking and social media websites among hundreds of millions of users worldwide has drawn the attention of many scholars to investigate cyberspace as a potentially legitimate research field. After all, even if accessed remotely or anonymously, the internet has undeniably become a medium of some kind of social interaction through which some areas of studies in the physical world could also be pursued in cyberspace. Several university courses and anthropological literature that have already identified cyberspace as a legitimate research site are emerging wildly and swiftly. For instance, Daniel Miller (2014) argues in *Tales from Facebook* that social media websites have profound impacts on its users' lives' such as cultivating relationships, breaking up marriages, devastating privacy and breaking isolation, to name a few. As equally important, Miller also examines the impact of social media on society through, for example, activism, online church activities and online commerce. However, for cyberspace to indeed be a legitimate field site, there are two basic questions that anthropologists investigating cyberspace need to answer. First, can we think of online social networking as communities by which we can extend familiar and innovative sociocultural analysis? Second, is indeed our online self-presentations consistent with who we are offline or are they fabrications and fantasies? As with the case of the human experience in the physical offline world, answers to such questions are elusive. Before the explosion of internet use and access, Sherry Turkle argues in *The Second Self*, published in 1984, that computers for adults and college students are a “catalyst for cultural formation” or in other words a medium of self-reflection and a lens through which others and life is perceived (156). In other words, for Turkle, the computer is not merely part of the physical world but also essentially a part of ourselves. This is primarily due to the computer's involvement with our everyday psychological lives where the computer, to fend loneliness and emptiness, is “a companion without emotional demands” where “you can interact, but never feel

vulnerable to another person” (297). Seemingly with the widespread access to online social networking, fending off vulnerability to other people seems an unrealistic aspect of our relations with the computer. Turkle addresses this development in *Alone Together*, published in 2011, where she argues that online connectivity allows individuals to create and present an alternative reality of themselves or life that is “true in simulation” (153). In other words, for Turkle, the advent of online social networking hasn't interrupted the refuge we seek in computers but rather buffed it by creating alternative realities through which we can project fantasies of ourselves and escape from our frustrations. There are other scholars, however, who don't necessarily share Turkle's essentialist psychoanalysis of online activity and, instead, look for ways by which people online establish meaningful social relations. As mentioned earlier, Miller has examined ways by which Facebook could break isolation and allow people to reinforce their relations who would be otherwise disconnected due to illnesses, shyness, distances and time constraints. Keenan and Shiri (2008) argue that Facebook encourages sociability and interaction amongst its users by allowing them to restrict access to their profiles. This, the authors argue, creates a “familiar, private and safe” environment since Facebook users have the option to simply take social connections and networks in their physical world to their accounts. Dmitri Williams (2006) who studied interaction among players of World of Warcraft, a massive multiplayer online game, notes that for some players connection to the game servers and participating in game mechanics and objectives allowed them to get in touch with players from various backgrounds and identities in ways that may not be readily possible in the physical world (352). This, according to one of Williams' interlocutors, enables him to find people with common interests, inside and outside the game, whereas in the physical world his choices are limited by the people he meets at work or their friends (ibid). This is a crucial point to contrast with Turkle's perception of online activity as an escape from reality. Williams, on the other hand, offers an alternative perspective where online connection actually empowers some individuals to find meaningful relations formed around in game

objectives away from the restrictions and limitations of the physical world. Durante (2011) notes, along a similar line, that while in the physical world identity formation is constrained by social and environmental variables, cyberspace may allow its users to construct their “networked contexts of communication” and, accordingly, construct their own identity away from undesired restrictions or judgment (595).

3. Pathways to Atheism: Cultural Hybridity and the Formation of Values and Identities

Cultural hybridity implies a diffusion of values, lifestyles, beliefs, behaviors and attitudes from different cultures that it becomes implausible to make any claims for the authenticity of a particular culture based strictly on tradition and historical roots (Bhabha, 88). Upper middle class Egyptian families particularly are characterized by high exposure and consumption of foreign cultural products such as movies, music, TV and video games. Furthermore, most Upper Middle Class Egyptian families send their children to bilingual schools where English is the language of instruction. In fact, all of my interlocutors are indeed bilingual and all, including Jackson and Grace who experienced strict religious socialization, were also allowed almost without any qualms to consume western cultural products such as music, movies, video games and literature.

For instance, Layth recalled that during his childhood he was particularly impressed with *He-Man and The Masters of the Universe*, a popular American cartoons in the 1980s. At the end of each episode He-Man, the cartoon's protagonist, would conclude it with a brief lesson concerning life and ethics such as the imperativeness of honesty and helping people who are in need. Layth told me that, as a child, he took He-Man's lessons quite seriously because he looked up to the character and respected his heroism and good nature. Interestingly we know from the previous chapter that Layth's mother, despite being religious, was not interested in religious socialization because she was concerned it might radicalize her children. Therefore, what we are presented here in Layth's account is, at least, one alternative to religious socialization that was made available by his family's socioeconomic status. This is significant

because throughout the previous chapter we constantly encountered the implications of cultural influences outside the family that has, across all the cases, contributed to the lack of interest in religion regardless of the intensity of religious socialization.

Layth's account of He-Man's appeal is not exceptional. Alison for instance, despite her moderate religious socialization, told me that she used to listen to and adore pop artists and would even hang their posters on her bedroom's walls without objection from her parents. Similar experiences and interests were recalled by all of my other interlocutors which pinpoints the reach and influence of the consumption of western cultural products on shaping the tastes, ideas, beliefs, attitudes and values of not just my interlocutors but also most upper middle class Egyptians. This seems to fit well with Bourdieu's conception of habitus and its relation to social class as well as its implications on social behavior and identity formation. If people behave and think with accordance to what is made available to them, then access and consumption of western cultural products could, at least partially, explain why alternative lifestyles that does not conform to religious socialization was appealing to my interlocutors as we've discovered in the previous chapter. I realize that my argument seems to suggest a dichotomy of eastern-western values and lifestyles but this is precisely what I am not suggesting. In fact, Egypt has a very rich cultural diversity, different political orientations and various lifestyles that blurs east-west distinctions in cultural analysis. As discussed by Sherine Hafez's (2011) study of women working in Al-Hilal organization, speaking of a dichotomy of values and culture is neither fruitful nor accurate because of the complex imbrication of values, strategies and ideas between Islam and modernity or between Islam and secular values. With that in mind, and given the upper middle class' characteristic exposure to foreign cultural productions and bilingual education, we could infer that the socialization of my interlocutors was itself multi-faceted and rich with imbrications and contradictions.

Accordingly, perhaps the disconnection from religion was a result of the interplay of the imbrication and amalgamation of the various elements shaping cultural hybridity. In other words, atheism could be

perceived as an outcome and a manifestation of the silent tension and failed negotiations between the various identities acquired through socialization and exposure to their highly imbricated hybrid cultural experience. Analysing my interlocutors' pathway to atheism through the family, while has provided an important and needed background, was also proven to be incomplete. We have established that loose religious socialization predisposes children to alternative lifestyles and ideas. We have also observed that, despite moderate and strict religious socialization, outside influences may override acquired and inherited religious identity. The question is, therefore, how do these outside cultural influences become so pervasive? In relation to my interlocutors how can we, for example, explain Layth's need to develop his own understanding of religion? Furthermore, why wasn't he able to maintain and develop this understanding and instead transformed to atheism?

We know from the previous chapter that Layth was dismayed that, as per mainstream religious discourse, his mother's piety and moral fabric was in question simply because she did not wear the veil. Similarly, conversations with my some of my interlocutors have highlighted their perception of a contradiction between humanist and religious world-views where the latter divides mankind into categories of believers and disbelievers. This division, some of my interlocutors claimed, presents disbelievers as grave criminals who deserve eternal suffering which incited them to question and doubt Islam's moral integrity. For example, Joe recalls that he was upset with Friday sermons that tackled the damnation of non-believers and prayers for their demise and vanquish. "Why would a good Japanese person suffer eternally even if he heard about Islam and chose not to become Muslim?" Joe asked rhetorically. Similarly, Layth and Jackson claim that the exclusivity of salvation for Muslims was particularly troubling for them. "I was concerned that my Christian friends are destined to hell. I thought that they were good people and that no just God would torture them eternally for simply being born into the wrong religion and holding on to it like everybody else does" Layth told me. It's difficult to categorize these sentiments as a showdown between western and Egyptian values because they have

been internalized without such categorization and also because they relate to people that my interlocutors encounter in their everyday. Surely these encounters could be physical, as in the case of Christian friends and neighbours, or virtual through the consumption of cultural products such as that of musicians, artists, actors and writers. What is important, nevertheless, is that at a particular point a conflict between various voices within them was materialized in the need to clearly position themselves against religion or at least mainstream religious discourse. In a sense, this positioning highlights failures of negotiating their identities internally. Recognizing this tension once again, however, provides us with an incomplete answer as to why have my interlocutors transformed into atheism. In other words, why wasn't this tension resolved?

Some of my interlocutors recall that they have, with varying degrees, attempted to reconcile conflicting voices and world-views within them. For instance, Joe and Jackson well before turning to atheism believed that the theory of Evolution was a valid explanation of the development of life and acknowledged that it didn't sit well with religious narratives and stories about creation. While initially this recognition didn't pose a threat to their religious identity, a need to resolve this contradiction was developed with the emergence of further internalization of conflicts between non-theistic and religious world-views. To Jackson this process was accelerated by the pressure exercised on him by his family once he expressed his doubts in religion. To Joe, however, it was the September 11 attacks that intensified this tension and the need to resolve it. Because radical Islam was being centred towards global scrutiny after the attacks, Joe felt overwhelmed with the fierce debates on Islam and its links to terrorism and violence. "I found arguments at my face that I couldn't brush off coming from both critics and defenders of Islam and then a dilemma happened" Joe recalls. He was no longer sure if his own liberal interpretations of Islam, born out of his loose religious socialization, were indeed true to the texts or were rather what he wanted them to be to get some peace of mind. Furthermore, Joe's international school friends were "open minded", as Joe described them, and were interested in

discussions about religion that went on for a long time until most of them decided that religion was man made. “All the controversial stuff kept popping up in these discussions. Things such as polygamy, punishing apostates and gender inequality seemed part and parcel of religion and I couldn't just brush them off” he told me. Layth, who we know attempted to develop an individualistic understanding of religion, has a similar account. Like Joe, the September 11 attacks intensified the tension between his own interpretations of religion and mainstream religious discourse. “September 11 put Islam under the spotlight and all of a sudden the stark differences between how I perceive Islam and how it is preached and taught became apparent” he told me. Layth, however, was initially not sceptical about Islam and, instead, felt that preaching violence, hatred towards non-Muslims, restriction of liberties and misogyny were the antithesis of Islam. Upon further investigation online, however, Layth grew sceptical of religion and faced a severe faith crisis. “The more I read the more it turned out to me that it was, in fact, the preachers I've long disagreed with are the ones more true to Islam and that my values had no grounds in religion” Layth contended. Layth was severely traumatized as, unlike Hunter, religion was not just an important part of his identity but also a great source of support and peace of mind. “I frantically spent hours upon hours reading books and online articles as well as joining online discussion groups but the increased knowledge grew like an avalanche and took everything I believed in on its way” Layth proclaimed. One night, Layth recalls, with tears in his eyes, that he started praying and begging God for guidance and protection of his faith but his desperation amounted to a sudden “spiritual disconnection” and, for the very first time, walked out of prayers and never performed it again. “This it. It's over. That is what I told myself” Layth recalls.

In summary of this section, there are two points to observe to further develop this discussion. Firstly, the cultural influence coming from outside the family that we've observed in the previous chapter could be traced in two variables that are staples of the Egyptian upper middle class experience; the heavy consumption of western cultural products and the diversity within the broader Egyptian culture which

we identified as cultural hybridity. These two variables account for both the availability and allurements of alternative lifestyles which could explain the “disconnection” from religion that many of interlocutors have reported. Secondly, this exposure to the broader culture developed an internalized tension between the mainstream religious discourse delivered through religious socialization and alternative value system and ideas. When this tension is not resolved my interlocutors seemed to favour the values and perceptions of the world that they acquired from the broader cultural context over religious ones. We already know that exposure to alternative lifestyles and ideas was made possible by the readily available and accessible manifestations of cultural hybridity such as the diversity within the broader culture, music cassettes, cartoons, movies and literature. However, as per the accounts of Helios, Layth, Joe, Grace and Jackson we also know that online research and discussions played an important role in their pathway to atheism particularly because they were able to access information and engage in discussions that are otherwise obscured and difficult to do without risks. Therefore, to further account for the relation between globalization and the formation of atheist identity we also need to examine online activities and cyberspace as a medium for the unregulated exchange of alternative ideas as well as the development of online communities and a relatively safer avenue for self-expression.

4. Pathway to Atheism: Cyberspace and Unregulated Knowledge

Globalization is the “cultural, economic and demographic processes that takes place within nations but also transcends them” (Basch, 11-12). As discussed in the literature, many anthropologists and social scientists have become increasingly aware that many cultures are no longer bounded, if they ever were, with borders, oceans and territories. As we've observed earlier the free flow of information and consumption of cultural products, which are in turn buffed with bilingual education and access to the Internet, interrupt religious socialization by offering a diversity of alternative world-views, values and lifestyles. Durante (2001) argues that cyberspace allows its users to establish their own “networked

contexts of communication” and, consequently, construct their identities away from regulation and restriction by the state and society (595). Accordingly, it is by no coincidence that many of my interlocutors have, one way or the other, mentioned the internet in reflections on their transformation to atheism.

The internet marks pathways to atheism in two ways. First, the Internet allows access to information and ideas concerning religion and perceptions of the world that are, otherwise, largely restricted. Second, the Internet allows atheists to express themselves and to converse with others without restrictions whether due to anonymity or the availability of designated atheist communities online. For instance, Layth recalls spending hours every day in chat rooms and online forums that were dedicated to discussions on religion. Layth was consequently exposed to criticisms to Islam that further amplified his doubts which is almost exclusively only possible, at least without social backlash and legal repercussions, in the unregulated and anonymous medium of the Internet.

Similarly, Joe recalls that with growing doubts in his “liberal” interpretation of Islam, he was able to seek answers on the internet by examining debates on Islam which, otherwise, he had no access to. Furthermore, many of interlocutors recalled downloading books, reading articles, accessing Wikipedia entries and streaming documentaries which helped change their world-view and understanding of religion in the confines and privacy of their bedrooms without regulation or restriction.

Indeed it's quite difficult to find books that promote atheism, evolution or critique of religion, and Islam in particular, in conventional book stores and publishers' catalogues. For instance, Helios bought Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* on a trip to India which was not available for sale in Egypt. According to Helios this book initially had a significant influence on his ideas and perception of the world as it provided what he perceived as a “grounded and legitimate explanation of the world” that also corresponded with his increasing doubt and dissatisfaction with religious explanations of the world. Some others, however, who were not fortunate to afford travelling abroad and escape

restrictions imposed on literature critiquing religion, the Internet to them was an open, unlimited and unregulated source for books and articles available for download with a click on a mouse. In short, the Internet offered my interlocutors' a wealth of knowledge and information that is otherwise restricted and unavailable which has helped them shape their ideas and change their perceptions of the world. Furthermore, the Internet facilitates finding communities and engaging in conversations and debates about life, religion and atheism that is, otherwise, extremely difficult to do in the physical world. For example, for Grace, the Internet served as an unrestricted medium of discussion where one of her friends, an atheist himself, buffed her doubts about God's existence, particularly after her rape ordeal, in "one last final blow" to her theism.

This is not to say that such conversations could not take place away from the internet but rather that the internet facilitates sharing and reflection on experiences by lifting physical barriers and social restrictions. This is particularly exemplified by Jackson's membership in an anonymous Facebook group for atheists that helped him express himself and exchange ideas with like-minded individuals from all over the world. This is significantly important to take note off particularly because, away from the internet, he was not allowed to express and develop his ideas whether by his school management which temporarily expelled him or by his social network of family and friends who were shocked and dismayed by his beliefs. In other words, despite society's judgement and discrimination as well as the state's regulation and restriction, the internet doesn't only facilitate access to information that is otherwise blocked and banned but it also offers a space where individuals could virtually present themselves as they desire.

5. Religion and Atheism: the Interplay of Discourses

Foucault (1969) uses the term discourse to describe power relations as manifested through both practices and language. These power relations encompass values, norms, beliefs and ideas that shape the individual's subjectivity and form his positioning within the broader social context. Cultural

hybridity allows not merely the existence of different discourses but also the overlapping and often competing ones. As evident in my interlocutors' accounts the unresolved tension and competition between religious, scientific, humanistic and nationalist discourses has facilitated the imagination of atheism as either a conceivable closure or a consequent burden of the tension. Conceptualizing religion as a discourse allows us to capture an essential essence of the sense of disconnection from religion that many of my interlocutors have experienced. For example, the collision between concepts and values such as the exclusivity of salvation for believers and humanistic empathy for the eternal fate of mankind, the repressive terms of social placement for women and claims for gender equality, religious discrimination and equal citizenship, sharia law and civil liberties, pious behaviour and choice, to name a few, outline the prologues of disconnection from religion and its ramifications. Accordingly, we're incited to conceptualize religion as a discourse that is intrinsically bound and shaped by the larger social context. This includes the political context since disconnection from religion is often inspired by conflicts with state sanctioned religious discourse in relation to its power and the subjectivity of its citizens. Moreover, it also includes the context of socioeconomic arrangements since some of my interlocutors have accounted for the allurements of available and consumable cultural products and avenues that allow alternate social behaviour. Consequently, just as religion could not be conceived or conceptualized away from its context, the formation of atheism as an identity could not be understood without accounting for the underlining social, economic and political influences. I am not arguing that turning to atheism is devoid of intellectual integrity and neither am I proposing a power-reductionist explanation. Instead I am arguing that it would be an incomplete and perhaps futile to conceptualize atheism as merely an intellectual or a philosophical position without, at least, accounting for the different variables that made this position possible to be imagined.

6. Concluding Remarks

This chapter built on the background that we have established through the examination of the

implications of different types of religious socialization on my interlocutors' emotions, attitudes, values and ideas that, in different ways, predisposed them to apostasy. The embodiment of cultural formations particularly seemed to spark tension within some families or produce an internalized tension between the expectations of “proper” social behaviour and the desire for an alternative lifestyle. Analysing the formation of atheist identities within the family, however, fell short in completely explaining my interlocutors' pathway to atheism since we have constantly, across all the cases, encountered cultural influences coming from outside the family. The need to closely examine these influence was further amplified with our observation that, regardless of the intensity of religious socialization, the pervasive appeal and availability of alternative values, world-views and lifestyles had overridden the religious identity acquired by my interlocutors. The main question we've attempted to answer in this chapter is; how can we explain the sense of “disconnection” from religion that most of my interlocutors had experienced and, one way or the other, reported as the first steps towards apostasy and later atheism? Because this “disconnection”, as it became increasingly obvious with every interview I conduct, relates to cultural influences coming from outside the family and the appeal of alternative lifestyles and world-views, I've related most of my interlocutors' pathway to atheism to the fluid and multi-faceted broader culture. I've argued that because Egypt possesses significant cultural hybridity which is further intensified by Egyptian upper middle class families' socio-economic status, socialization within the family itself was multi-faceted and accommodative of outside influences and particularly the consumption of western cultural products and bilingual education. Accordingly, I've argued that when a tension arises between different world-views and value systems that are internalized within the individual, failures to resolve it positions individuals in an either-or situation where, in the case of my interlocutors, religious world-view gave in to scientific or humanistic ones. Furthermore, failures to resolve this tension could be partially explained, such as in Grace's account of her rape, through critical life events or the implications of global conflicts where religion became central to debates and scrutiny

as in the aftermath of September 11. Since I am implying that serious and thorough intellectual endeavours as well as research needs to be exerted to attempt to resolve this tension, we were left with a significant gap in my analysis of my interlocutors' pathways to atheism; how and where did my interlocutors have access to the necessary information and debates on religion? This is an important question to tackle because we know for a fact that the Egyptian government imposes restrictions or bans altogether articles, books and even movies that may, one way or the other, scrutinize religion. Accordingly, we've explored ways, as per my interlocutors' account, of utilizing the Internet as a source and destination for gathering information, building knowledge, shaping an atheist identity and self-expression away from regulations and restrictions. In short, because the Internet can escape from social regulation and state control, we can account for it as the final piece in the puzzle as to how individuals may develop their pathways to atheism.

Chapter Four

Identity: Being Atheist and Coping Mechanisms

1. Introduction

My interviews with upper middle class Egyptian atheists has identified several pathways to atheism through which when a couple or more variables are combined, abandoning religion and forfeiting faith altogether becomes a possibility for individuals with a crisis in faith. Disconnection from religious rituals, dissatisfaction with religious explanations of the world as well as the conflicts between values preached in mainstream religious discourse and those acquired by individuals otherwise mark some of the pathways that I've identified. Additionally, exposure to western culture and literature, bilingual education that enables cognitively processing different ideas, the organic diversity of the Egyptian culture, loose religious socialization as well as access to the internet allows alternative lifestyles and world-views, such as atheism, to become a possibility in the imagination spectrum of individuals. The diversity of individual pathways to atheism is also reflected on the different ways by which individuals manage their atheism in their daily lives. My discussion on these coping mechanisms will revolve around one general question; what is it that enables, incites or prohibits different attitudes and behaviors? I will divide my analysis into three parts where I will look at how and why different modes of interaction are adopted as per my interlocutors' accounts of their experiences. This will also help us explain and understand the attitude and behavior of some Egyptian atheists which would not only reveal the ways they manage and negotiate their identities but also how society accommodates and restricts alternative lifestyles and world-views. Before I proceed I need to pinpoint that just as individuals may combine several variables in their pathway to atheism, some may also combine various modes of interaction with their social environment. Therefore, I don't by any means argue that a particular mode of interaction is necessarily set in stone for each individual and rather try to offer insights on how some Egyptian atheists may engage with society. For many of interlocutors different

modes of interaction are shuffled through according to social settings or as they become more seasoned and/or relaxed with managing their identity.

2. Review of the Literature

Mechanisms of Atheist Identity Formation

To move on forward with exploring how individuals manage their atheism we need first to define the notion of identity and how it influences individual belief, behavior and attitude. Howard (1991) argues that identity is formed when the individual is placed as a social object and with accordance to the appropriation of terms of this placement (210). Social placement, through stereotyping and categorization, is a convenient method for society to establish terms of social interaction without necessarily learning or taking in account the details and complexities of each individual experience. Identity can, accordingly, be thought of as a reaction to said categorizations and the terms of interaction dictated by social placement. However, identity is also a product of reflection where individuals establish their behavior and attitude towards their immediate social environment and broader social context. Identity could therefore also be seen as a consequence of everyday interaction with not only social environment but also self-reflection and individual thought. This general double sided characteristic of identity summons an immediate need for the deconstruction of social categories and conveniently developed stereotypes that conceal details rich of diversity and uniqueness that are pivotal to understanding any social experience. Furthermore, it lays the ground for identifying identity as a multifaceted notion of the self rather than a fixed and singular self-understanding. If indeed identity is a consequence of social placement that establishes terms of interaction, it could be assumed that the individual could potentially react differently when one particular categorization is summoned, ignored or not detected.

Smith (2011), who studied the cases of some atheists in the United States, constructed what he calls of “the standard model” of becoming atheists. There are three basic stages in this model where, to

become atheist, firstly, a person gradually challenges and detaches himself from religious cultural and institutional expressions. Secondly, cultural, normative and supernatural views and beliefs are pushed aside and replaced with a non-theistic world view. Finally, a person “comes out” and affirms his beliefs and ideas which Smith argues is the most important final step in creating an atheist identity. In summary the pathway to atheism, according to Smith, involves challenging and detaching from religion, replacing theistic views with scientific or humanistic ones and affirming one's identity publicly. Le Drew (2013) criticizes Smith's standard model for implying a strictly fixed linear trajectory of identity formation and suggests that, instead, we must take in account the nature of socialization atheists encounter to take in account more possibilities of becoming atheist and expressing being atheist.

Erving Goffman (1963) classifies identity into two categories based on their visibility. The first category is discredited identity which is visible and could be immediately identified such as race, gender or disability. The second category is discreditable identity which is invisible and cannot be immediately identified without individual public assertion such as ideology, religion or sexual orientation. Therefore, due to the visibility of discredited identities particular terms of interaction, expectations and stereotypes maybe enforced on the individual without a chance for escape. On the other hand, discreditable identities allow the individual to react in different ways when interacting with others since they are not readily identified. Accordingly, individuals holding one or more discreditable identities, and hence invisible ones, can choose to pass on revealing their identities and act as if they don't hold them. Conversely individuals holding one or more discreditable identities can choose to affirm them and, consequently, resist and challenge the associated stigmas. Atheism, as a discreditable identity, allows atheists to choose different ways of interacting with others where their beliefs are not necessarily summoned and, consequently, avoid the terms of social placement.

The division of identity into discredited and discreditable identities does not only offer insights on

various ways atheists can negotiate, pass or affirm their identity but also the means by which society appropriates alternative lifestyles and beliefs. In many of the cases I've interviewed there seems to be a striking difference of society's reaction when a particular problematic or controversial behavior of an atheist, such as alcohol consumption, is practiced casually without justification and when it is practiced with an assertion of an atheist identity that lifts mainstream restrictions. What this goes to show is that passing stigmatized identities can offer a relative freedom to act that is devoid of social criticism and scrutiny. On the other hand an affirmation of stigmatized identities, while behaving the same way, can incur a social backlash. Understanding atheism in Egypt as a social experience must take in account these differences does not reveal the different possibilities of behaving as an atheist but also sheds the light on the different ways atheists position themselves in their social world based on their ability or desire to affirm or pass their identities in social interaction. The division of identity into discredited and discreditable ones is useful for anticipating various means of interaction especially when a stigmatized identity is not visible or pronounced. Realizing the difference between both, however, is not necessarily preceded by the assumption that a particular identity must always dictate and influence all behavior at all times. Individuals may possess different identities at once where the individual combines gender, occupation, religious background, social status, education, hobbies and so on. Identities often overlap, supersede, marginalize and amplify one another. In other words, identities are as complex and imbricated as the infinite social and even biological variables that shape them. Stryker (1981), accordingly, suggests that identities are constructed and organized into a "hierarchy of salience". Salience, in this sense, is the way by which an individual places his identities into this hierarchy where particular identities maybe useful or important at given times with given people or ignored and marginalized at other instances with other people. In other words, an individual with a stigmatized identity does not necessarily have to choose between concealing or affirming his identity as in some instances of interaction there is no need to do either. In other instances, a stigmatized identity might not

be as important as other ones to an individual and, accordingly, his behavior is influenced by other identities almost at all instances even when there is a window of opportunity to enact this stigmatized identity without backlash or alienation. In other words, a possession of a particular identity does not necessarily imply that particular behavior or attitude would follow at some or any given times.

Religion, or lack thereof, is usually more salient than other identities as it establishes world-views and group membership for the individual. However, acknowledging the organization of identities into a hierarchy of salience is useful when observing the case of Egyptian atheists as it could help us in the deconstruction of atheism as a social category by taking in account both individual experiences and the different possibilities of social action. What salience implies is not just the possibility of an identity superseding another but also the negotiation of identities within an individual prior to social interaction. Salience, therefore, could help us understand and explain why atheists don't always think and behave in the same way which is an observation that does not only offer insights on individual experiences but also the social conditions that allow different modes of behavior.

Atheist Identity and Coping Mechanisms

Stigmatized identities may put a burden on the individual even without assertion because it could incite a feeling of social alienation or detachment if the terms of social placement are devaluing, hostile or otherwise antagonistic. While this may pose a minimal problem to individuals who don't consider atheism as high in salience, individuals who feel strongly about atheism as an identity may feel an uncomfortable social pressure especially if they are met with particular expectations to display some level of religiosity or observance to religious tradition and rites. Since atheism is uncommon in Egypt and because religion serves as a collective identity, some atheists may feel a lack of social solidarity due to not sharing common interests, values and experiences with their community. Brewer (1991) argues that collective identities serve as a “buffer” that protects the individual from feeling worthless and vulnerable (481). Therefore, it is necessary to consider how atheists react to the terms of their

social placement and categorization as well as how they position themselves in their social environment. From earlier discussion in this chapter we know that, since atheism is a discreditable identity, atheists can choose to pass their identity to avoid problematic terms of social placement. But even when that is the case one could assume that atheists devise ways to negotiate their identities both within themselves and with their social environment. That is equally true with atheists who affirm their identity as they will, consequently, have to deal with the repercussions of “coming out”.

Acknowledging this challenge is crucial to understanding what it means to be atheist and how the behavior and attitude of atheists is shaped. Further in-depth analysis and study of the cases of Egyptian atheists could reveal different coping mechanisms as well as social settings that enable or restrict social action. I will, however, attempt to identify if some patterns exist in the way some Egyptian atheists become atheist and behave accordingly.

4. Being Atheist in Egypt: Passing

Holding an atheist identity could have serious legal and social repercussions in Egypt. Many atheists who publicly announce their ideas are prosecuted for “defamation of religion” and could be met with several years in prisons if they are convicted in courts. Furthermore, the official state campaign to “battle atheism” has outlined an obnoxious portrayal of atheists who, according to the campaign's propaganda, are necessarily immoral, corrupted, dangerous and threatening to social cohesion and public order. In addition, around 86% of Egyptian Muslims believe that the death penalty is an appropriate punishment for apostasy. It is, thus, understandable that some Egyptian atheists would choose to pass their identity out of fear of legal prosecution and social ostracism.

Passing is by far the most common mode of interaction that I identified after speaking to my interlocutors who are ominously aware of the potential grave consequences of publicly self-identifying as atheists. Alison, who was quite religious until her early twenties, strictly keeps her beliefs for herself away from her parents, siblings and co-workers. “I want to spare myself debates, heartbreaking my

family and social rejection. To say the least I will become a freak” she told me. Jackson who at one point strongly affirmed his identity to his family and school peers recalls that the negative backlash got him expelled from school and forced to take medicine to “cure atheism” and, accordingly, “learn the hard way” that there are things that are better kept to oneself. Joe, on the other hand, did not encounter major conflicts with his family when he “came out” as an atheist. This is an interesting difference to observe because as while Joe experienced loose religious socialization, Jackson and Alison experienced varying degree of significant religious socialization. Furthermore, it's also worth noting that Alison is concerned about her parent’s feelings which signifies the good relations she had with her parents despite abandoning the religious lifestyle they wanted for her. Accordingly, we could argue that while good parental relations may facilitate the adoption of alternative lifestyles, it also doesn't necessarily mean that parents would accept their children's atheism, at least with not resistance or expressing distressed emotions.

While Joe says that his family deals with his atheism as “something in the background” or some sort of an elephant in the room, he proclaimed that he strictly passes his beliefs in the work space because he just “wants to get out of it what is there to achieve; a good living standard”. Joe, who was initially inclined to discuss his beliefs whenever an opportunity presented itself, was preemptively and indirectly warned about the consequences of public proclamation of atheism in one significant encounter with his co-workers. “My colleagues were once recollecting their experiences with consuming alcohol, which is one of my favorite pass times, and when I attested that I usually drink after work without displaying regret I was met with dismay and shock despite the fact that some of them at least occasionally or at some point in their lives did the same” Joe recalled. “I became Joe, the drinker, and I didn't want to be labeled as such. Imagine what it would be like if I was also Joe the atheist” he added. Since then Joe has been met with curiosity and questioning about his religious believes specially that he misses out on prayers and objects to playing Qur'anic verses in the

background at work. “I am sometimes asked whether or not I miss on prayers because I am lazy or not convinced but I try to be diplomatic about it and try to brush it off without giving answers” he told me. While some of his co-workers display annoyance and shock when he asks them not to play Qur’anic verses in the background, they always comply when he argues that the work-place should be neutral specially when there are Christians who are also working there.

Joe's experience highlights that attaching blunt non-theistic justification for public display of irreligiosity that implies a deliberate disregard of religion makes it even more problematic and controversial. This is particularly important for understanding how society accommodates and manages alternative lifestyles as it seems that while impiety, as in not behaving religiously as expected, could be relatively tolerated and accepted, irreligious attitude and announced disbelief may incur restriction, rejection and backlash.

Grace shares the same work-ethic with Joe as she also avoids publicly announcing her atheism with her co-workers. “My family know that I'm atheist but why do I need to speak about it with my colleagues? Atheism is not an issue or a value that I feel strongly about promoting or defending it when I could use my time at work and elsewhere to do the things I need or enjoy” Grace told me. Joe and Grace's experience seem to highlight that differences in the salience of atheism doesn't necessarily dictate different modes of interaction where, despite Joe's higher recognition of his atheist identity, he chooses to pass his identity out of convenience. The fluidity of identity and the potential changes in salience is an important characteristic that we need to account for when trying to understand how some atheists behave and negotiate their identity.

Helios and Layth, like Jackson and Joe, recall that initially they felt compelled to seize every opportunity to come out as atheists but eventually decided to, selectively, keep their ideas to themselves especially when they came to self-identify with several other identities and experiences other than their irreligiosity. “I may be agnostic but I am also a father, a researcher, an educator, a musician, a soccer

fan boy and a humanist. I no longer needed to assert my agnosticism as it became, eventually, just something in the background when there is so much else going on. In other words, I became more free to select how I interact with others without necessarily feeling that I need to attest my disbelief to gain acceptance or do the things I wanted” Layth clarified.

All these accounts highlight passing as an effective coping mechanism whether out of convenience, experiencing severe backlash or simply ranking salience of disbelief lower in the hierarchy of identity. Moreover, passing is made even more appealing since behavior and alternative lifestyles are more tolerated and less restricted when disbelief is not attached and announced as a justification. In short, finding a space to adopt different lifestyles, practice hobbies and experience life as desired doesn't summon a need to announce an atheist identity or to negotiate choices based on a claim for equal rights and social recognition. This space, however, shouldn't motivate us to readily nullify the fear of social backlash, ostracism and legal prosecution as these consequences are, more often than not, taken in consideration when some Egyptian atheists choose to adopt passing as a coping mechanism.

5. Being Atheist in Egypt: Affirmation

Despite the potentially grave social and legal consequences of declaring atheism, some Egyptian atheists are compelled to “come out” as atheists with varying degrees of comfort. For some Egyptian atheists, as we've already discussed, the affirmation of an atheist identity is an initial phase that may become superseded by convenience, experiencing social backlash or changing the salience of atheism in their hierarchy. However, some Egyptian atheists choose to continue affirming their identity despite the negative terms of social placements.

Layth, who often chooses to pass his disbelief, acknowledges that he also occasionally finds no qualms about expressing it “The way I manage expression of disbelief depends on the context. There is no need for everyone to know the way I think and I don't feel that it's the only important part of who I am.”

Layth said to me. “However, sometimes I choose to openly express my disbelief especially when I

know that such announcement will be tolerated or is necessary” he added. “When I had my first child my family wanted me to circumcise him as per tradition. When circumcision became a repeated issue open for debate I asserted that I will not do such a thing because it comes from outdated and primitive scripture and had no medical basis. That was that and openly coming out with my disbelief seems to have ended the discussion” Layth recalls.

Tolerance of disbelief or urgency of its proclamation, however, are not the only variables for affirmation. We already know that besides avoiding social backlash and ranking disbelief lower in salience, the ability for most the Egyptian atheists I've encountered to adopt their desired lifestyle without proclamation of disbelief makes passing a more appropriate coping mechanism than affirmation. Why is it, accordingly, that some Egyptian atheists choose to affirm their identity despite the potential consequences?

Hunter says that while he doesn't seek to announce his atheism whenever possible and that he avoids crossing the “red lines” such as insulting religious figures. However, he also doesn't shy away from debating religion when the subject is opened up. Hunter also doesn't give excuses when asked to join a prayer group or asked why he doesn't pray. Instead Hunter asserts that he doesn't pray because he doesn't know if God exists or not. This is quite remarkably a very straightforward answer that, as Hunter acknowledges, is a shocker to many people. The question is what is it that enables Hunter or motivates him to be so open when most of my other interlocutors tread very lightly when confronted with the issue? Hunter proclaims that he is open about his disbelief not because he has a need to assert his identity but rather that he is generally honest and straightforward in communicating what he thinks and feels about everything. “I treat people fairly. Help them when they are in need and I am generally kind to others. I don't need to explain myself to them if they don't like or don't accept who I am” Hunter explained.

But is character and personal qualities enough to explain Hunter's openness? Hunter acknowledges that

while his character doesn't allow people to push him around for his open disbelief or expression of ideas, his status in the work place primarily discourages people from taking any shock or dismay further. Hunter explains that he is “well connected” to the upper management of his work place which makes his colleagues reluctant to confront him because they don't want to anger him. Williamson and Yancey (2013) speak of a “majority group status” that enforces some atheists' ability and desire to make “determinations about social and theological reality” (40). It could be the case that with Hunter's social status, economic wellbeing and prestige that he is able to comfortably be open about his disbelief while avoiding many, but obviously not all, terms of social placement dictated by categorization and stereotyping. Nevertheless, Hunter acknowledges that this would not have been possible if he was working at another place or if he crosses the “red-lines” mentioned earlier. Accordingly, Hunter's experience highlights that even with “coming-out” one could assume that there is a variety of ways by which outspoken atheists or agnostics express themselves and present their ideas.

Hunter's case highlights these differences when compared to the harsh critique and flat-out ridicule of religion, and particularly Islam, that Ismail Muhammad¹, an outspoken atheist activist, adopts. Ismail has appeared on few TV programs where he has declared his atheism. Ismail also runs a busy Facebook page and a Youtube program, entitled “The Black Ducks” where he conducts interviews with other outspoken atheists who reflect on their experience as atheists and express their ideas on religion. Ismail's online activities include propagation of scientific explanations of the universe, civil rights activism, critique of religion and, at many times, ridicule of religious figures and texts. Ismail's first appearance on Egyptian TV channel CBC caused a public uproar and reinforced the media outcry that atheism is a “worrying and dangerous phenomenon”. Despite the media outcry, the social backlash and the possibility of facing legal prosecution, Ismail doesn't seem to back down. Ismail explains his persistence on two grounds. Firstly, Ismail believes that the shock value of “coming-out” and not only

¹Both Ismail and I felt and agreed that because he is already outspoken about his beliefs and has publicly voiced his opinions on Youtube and Egyptian TV channels that we don't need to mask his identity or give him an alternative name.

expressing disbelief but also openly critiquing and ridiculing religion is necessary to the recognition of the civil rights of not just atheists but also all Egyptians. “There can be no middle grounds about it. We either want or respect all civil rights for all Egyptians or we don't” Ismail explained. Secondly, Ismail believes that attacking society at the core of its disregard of civil and human rights, which he largely attributes to religion, is necessary for social and political change. This attack also, Ismail contends, could possibly dry out the basin of ideologically recruiting extremists and Islamists in general. In other words, affirmation of an atheist identity to Ismail serves his activism and overarching social and political goals. Furthermore, this affirmation, according to Ismail, is necessary for him to become a full citizen with fully recognized rights. Ismail's case presents a significant difference in using affirmation as a coping method in comparison with Hunter and, even more, with most of my interlocutors who don't feel that “coming out” is necessary to adopt whichever lifestyle they prefer.

6. Being Atheist in Egypt: Pretending

Goffman's two categories of interaction, passing and affirmation, largely cover a variety of reasons why some Egyptian atheists behave in a particular way. The interviews with my interlocutors has revealed an additional third mode of interaction where some Egyptian atheists temporarily adopt a Muslim identity. This Muslim identity could be fully fledged, one that is just as observant of traditions and rituals as everyone else or one that is relaxed and rather negligent in performing religiously as expected while implying that religious beliefs are still held. The latter, as coined by three of my interlocutors, is called being a Muslim *Menafad*². The key difference between passing and pretending is that the former doesn't convey information about either belief or disbelief whereas the latter either asserts or implies a Muslim identity. Pretending is usually practised when social pressure becomes increasingly pervasive and answers as to why a particular behaviour or a ritual is not observed becomes urgent. For example,

²Menafad is a slang term, used mainly by many Egyptian youths, for “negligence” or “never-minding”. An example of it's usage would be when one expresses the act of ignoring a task, a commitment, a request or a social situation where a particular action or behavior is expected but not performed.

Jackson who was met with severe backlash from his family and forced to take anti-depressants to “cure” his atheism, attends the Friday prayers every week like “good Muslims do” to fend off his family's inquisition. Similarly, Helios at least initially also attended the Friday prayers as not to warrant a discussion about his lack of religiosity and regard to religion. Even now, according to Helios, he still joins prayers with his colleagues to avoid raising unwanted suspicion and questions about his beliefs. During the month of Ramadan both pretend to be fasting, at least when their families are watching, to nullify any doubts that they may incur from their behaviour or attitude throughout the year. Therefore, both employ pretending as a coping mechanism where a Muslim identity is temporarily adopted and conveyed through, at least visibly, a fully-fledged performance of the behaviour expected from a “good Muslim”.

Not all atheists who choose not to “come-out”, however, are comfortable with observing rituals and traditions they don't believe in. Accordingly, implying a negligent Muslim identity, one that is *Menafad*, comes as some sort of a compromise between not wanting to be labelled as a disbeliever and not forcing oneself to observe particular traditions and rituals just to fend off questions and doubts about their true identity. Alison recalls that because she is not veiled and doesn't join prayers with her colleagues, that she was often asked whether or not she is Muslim and, if so, why she doesn't pray with the rest. Instead of joining prayers to quench her colleague's curiosity she proclaims that she is a Muslim who, however, is not particularly observant of religious duties. Sometimes she, jokingly at least to herself, asks her colleagues to pray for her “guidance”. This response is usually enough for her colleagues to understand and accept her behaviour and move on with their day rather than dwell on reasons why she “should” pray and become “closer to God”. Layth occasionally employs this strategy, despite sometimes being open about his disbelief in certain contexts when his behaviour or attitude draws suspicion. “Sometimes I'd be sitting at a local café during the Friday prayers and because that happens a lot I was sometimes asked by the café's workers why I don't go to the prayers. I sometimes

brush it off by saying things such as I hope that one day God would guide me or *Al-Shaitan Shater* (Satan is clever)”. Such answers, Layth proclaims, are completely understood and regarded as a viable explanations of not behaving as expected.

Such situations and the effectiveness of this strategy reminded me of Joe's colleague's dismayed reaction to his blatant and open attestation of consuming alcohol without regret. What these situations seem to highlight is that while particular behaviours is frowned upon it is the attitude by which they are practiced that decides the difference between acceptance and severe backlash. In other words, if typically being atheist means, at least partially, that some restrictions on social behaviour is lifted, it could be accepted by society so as long it is not regarded as a statement or a direct challenge to religion.

This is crucial not only to understanding atheism as a social experience but also, and equally important, how society manages and accommodates alternative lifestyles. In this sense it seems that society is more tolerant of behaviour than of ideas even if the former is a reflection of the latter so as long no direct challenges are being perceived to tradition and religion. In short, the model of the Muslim *Menafad*, outlines that society is concerned more with attitude rather than behaviour. These distinctions became even more apparent in my investigation of how three local cafés, in the vicinity of a neighbourhood mosques, operate during the Friday prayers.

8. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter we've discussed the different ways my interlocutors “be atheist” through the examination of the different coping mechanisms with the social stigma associated with atheism. There are two main arguments I am making. Firstly, coping mechanisms are not necessarily set in stone since some of my interlocutors shuffle through different strategies and modes of behaviour. Secondly, there are overlapping variables that may influence the decision on which coping mechanism to adopt.

Passing is usually adopted for two main reasons; the fluidity and differences in the salience of atheism

in identity hierarchies and the fear of social backlash. Additionally, passing could be adopted out of convenience and particularly when desired social gains does not summon the need to assert atheism and disbelief. Affirmation is adopted when social backlash could be averted or, at least, diminished out of social status. In some instances, as highlighted by Layth who didn't want to circumcise his child, affirmation of atheism or disbelief is sometimes necessary to confront and challenge social pressure to conform to undesired practices and restrictions. We've also observed that affirmation could be employed as a cultural and political resistance to social regulation and state control by atheist activists. Finally, pretending to be a negligent Muslim is adopted by individuals who want to fend off suspicion and social pressure to observe religious rituals and practices.

The main difference between affirmation and pretending is that the latter is employed in response to situations where questions and doubts about atheists' religious identities could not be simply brushed off and talked out of without compromise. Instead, pretending involves an affirmation of a false religious identity either through verbal implications, like using religious mannerisms, or through the actual performance of rituals like not eating in public during Ramadan or performing prayers. We have also observed through the accounts of my interlocutors and particularly those who usually adopt pretending as a coping mechanism that while society may seem to be keen about enforcing a façade of observance of religious rituals and traditions, it is largely concerned with people's attitude and beliefs more than behaviour. Furthermore, pretending reveals other mechanisms by which society, in its turn, accommodates alternative behaviour through a very basic yet significant accommodative social code; impious behaviour could be tolerated and accommodated so as long as no direct, conscious and deliberate challenge to religion is perceived. This accommodative social code necessitates further examination of ways by which society allows alternative behaviour and lifestyle and its relevance to the experience of being atheist in Egypt

Chapter Five

Atheism and Public Space: The Impious City

1. Introduction

The discussion in the previous chapter has revealed that pretending as a coping mechanism capitalizes on an already established accommodative social code that allows manifestations of impiety; not observing particular socially expected religious behavior and practices such as performing prayers and wearing the veil. This code is established to relatively accommodate and accept impiety and alternative lifestyles so as long as they are not perceived as a conscious and deliberate challenge religion. I've argued that while society seemingly frowns upon impious behavior, it is more concerned about and more restrictive to alternative ideas and attitudes. We have already explored the multi-faceted characteristic of Egyptian culture in relation to globalization, cultural hybridity and religious socialization in the previous chapters. Accordingly, we have recognized that alternative lifestyles and ideas are made available and conceivable by the diversity within the Egyptian culture and the upper middle class socioeconomic status alongside other cultural influences such as religion, the family and the state's social agenda. To further understand how individuals experience being atheist in Egypt and how they manage the stigma associated with atheism we have to consider broader social strategies that negotiate the obligation to observe religion vis-à-vis the desire to behave differently in social settings. To achieve this I will examine how public space, as a frontier of cultural formation, is also used, as per the accommodative social code I've discussed earlier, to accommodate emotions, desires and lifestyles that don't comply with expectations of “proper” behavior expected from “good citizens” and “good Muslims”.

2. Review of the Literature

Public Space and the Sacred City

In its early development, anthropology was primarily invested in cultural studies of the “other” who

was perceived to be primitive and fundamentally different than civilized western societies. A couple of variables shifted the outbound attention of anthropologists towards their own societies and nations.

Firstly, largely due to technological advancements in travel facilitated by airplanes and railways, there were becoming increasingly less obscure and “new” societies to explore and study (MacClancy; 2002).

Secondly, at the start of the 20th century, many anthropologists became interested in studying the societies of developing nation states that emerged in the aftermath of the First World War and, particularly, countryside and village dwellers.

Consequently, given the eclectic nature of villages, the city began to become regarded as a primary structuring variable and a distinctive research avenue that warranted the development of urban anthropology as a sub-discipline of its own. At the same time the Chicago School of Urban Ecology in the early 20th century identified the city as “adjacent ecological niches” that human groups inhabited in coaxial rings around the core (Wirth 1938). Accordingly, class, status, occupation, experience, values, preferences and taste are organized and formed as to where individuals and groups are located in these niches and rings. In effect, theorizing the city has become detrimental to understanding daily “macroprocessess” in the everyday that relates to symbols, social relations, political economy, social structures, values and behavior (Low, 384). In a sense the city was no longer merely perceived as a physical plane that is characterized by architecture and environment but rather as a locus of the juxtaposition of physical characteristics as well as the desires, beliefs, values, emotions, socioeconomic arrangements and memories which Richard Sennett (1994) collectively describes as the “mixture of flesh and stone”.

According to Setha Low (1994) urban anthropology could be divided into four main categories of studying the city. The first approach involves studying the city in terms of the social networks that, based on the family and kinship relations, form the urban communities inside the city. The second approach examines the relation between power and knowledge in urban planning by accounting for the

involvement of capital, claims for land tenure rights by the state and human groups, urban renewal, new town designs and redevelopment after natural disasters, to name a few.). The third approach explores the link between the local and supralocal units of the city such as the flow of goods/services/employment from the countryside to the city and vice versa, as a point of analysis of the city. The fourth approach introduces political economy to studying the cities with attention to social issues such as alienation, inequality and the social effects of capitalism and neoliberalism. These approaches opened the door for an explosion of literature and perspectives that animates the city and recognizes the diversity of experiences within it that, both, transcends and conforms to space. With that in mind, most contemporary literature on the city doesn't sharply follow these approaches since not only are the social variables shaping life in the city numerous and diverse but are also overlapping and interdependent. Setha Low (1996) argues that analyzing contemporary urban anthropology and our understanding of the city would be better accomplished through “images and metaphors” that heuristically captures different ideas, concepts, perceptions and experiences of the city (387). Accordingly, Low conceptualizes literature on the city based on social relations (the ethnic city, the divided city, the gendered city and the contested city), economics (the deindustrialized city, the global city and the informational city), urban architecture (the modernist city, the postmodern city and the fortress city) and religion (the sacred city and the traditional city). For instance, conceptualizing the gendered city invokes studies on women's work in the market, domestic management and on the street as hagglers. These studies, and more along the same line, conceptualize the gendered city as a space by which women “negotiate the contradictions of the city in their own particular way” to survive, contest and adapt to the gendered inequalities in terms of access to the street, employment and social roles (Wilson, 8). For another instance, conceptualizing the sacred city incites the examination of the city as a setting where religious systems are embodied and civic life is orchestrated by the observance of religious rituals and values.

Edward Reeves (1992) studied shrines erected for Muslim saints in Tanta, a northern Egyptian city, in relation to socioeconomic power relations that involve formal institutions as well as the privileged and impoverished individuals. Reeves notes that class division and economic inequality both shape and are shaped by reverence of Muslims saints and their shrines. The geographical location of Tanta between the two branches of the Nile made the city an important trade center especially with the boom in cotton trade in the 19th century. Trade fairs and ceremonies that were held in commemoration of the most prominent saint in Tanta, A'Sayed Al-Badawi, attracted traders and buyers from Tanta, Cairo and other cities in Egypt (309). The economic significance of Tanta, however, withered with the fall of cotton prices in the 1930s and eventually blatant differences in wealth and power developed and became more apparent (308, 311). Reeves argues that saint shrines in Tanta could be perceived as both a symbol for resistance and a venue for justifying and maintaining social order and class inequalities.

This apparently paradoxical duality could be understood by taking in account two variables. First, while particular miracles and powers that are attributed to saints allegedly aids people in personal matters such as illness or financial crisis, saints are also believed to be capable of bringing judgment on wealthy or powerful individuals who are perceived to be immoral or unfair and cruel to their dependents (311). Reeves proclaims that among the many narratives he encountered about the power of saints none depicted the saints ever taking the side of the powerful, the wealthy and the authority against “common people” (312). Accordingly, we are presented with ways by which the reverence of saints, amplified and produced by the erection of physical shrines, manifests resistance to social inequality or at least grievances towards individuals who abuse their power. Second, the privileged and powerful individuals' donations to the shrines for maintenance, beautification and renovation serve as a public display and attestation of their power and status as well as their piety and devotion to God by making offerings to his chosen saints (314). In a sense the shrine becomes a locus of flashing and expressing wealth and power as well as justifying and normalizing inequalities.

3. Close but not Enough: Vicinity and Accommodation of Impiety

The busy streets of Cairo become almost entirely vacant in early Friday mornings. Most governmental institutions and private shops are shut and most people remain in their houses for a great deal of the morning providing an unusual serenity and calmness to the few people wandering the streets. The local café where I met with Layth was no exception with only a few people around smoking shisha, drinking beverages or reading the newspaper. In the background we could listen to recitations of Qur'anic verses on TV and quiet conversations between some of the café's visitors. As noon approached, the first call for the Friday prayers could be heard from a nearby mosque just around the corner, and more people started showing up on the streets. Most, with rugs in their hands, would pass by the café on their way to the mosque and greet the visitors as they walk by. Suddenly, the street was teeming with people heading to the mosque to catch the start of the weekly Friday sermon.

While attending the sermon from the start in the mosque is a mandatory part of the Friday prayers many people choose to join the prayers towards the sermon's end or just about when the prayers is going to be performed. As the preacher's voice blasted through the mosque's megaphones, to the extent that it was sometimes hard to hear each other, some of the people on the café paid their checks and headed to the mosque. However, at the same time, it seemed like those who leave are replaced by even more people who were just beginning to make their orders, some with prayer rugs on their laps. With the average shisha smoking session taking up to 30 minutes or more I was wondering what the point of ordering is if they are going to have to leave shortly. However, most of the newcomers didn't join the prayers and not even towards the end of the sermon like many others do.

At this point the café was packed with visitors and was almost as busy as any day during the same time. This scene was repeated almost every single time of the many visits I made. During the prayers the café continues to serve its visitors albeit not with the same intensity as some of the workers leave for the prayers towards the end of the sermon. The activity of the café didn't seem to bother anyone from the residents or the people who were on their way to the mosque as if it's not there. I could even see the

back of the mosque right around the corner from where I was sitting and was compelled to think why no one is taking notice or expressing frustration with the cafe's activity despite the importance of performing the Friday prayers to both practicing and negligent Muslims.

At one time one of the workers who brings coal for the Shisha asked Layth if he was going to pray and Layth jokingly replied that “Satan is clever and the shisha tastes just too darn good” to which the worker laughed and moved on with serving other people. Of course had Layth proclaimed that he was agnostic or not interested in performing prayers the worker's reaction might have been quite different. However, adopting the identity of a negligent Muslim was enough for the worker not to follow up on his curiosity and questions. After all, he himself didn't go the prayers and watched over the other visitors' orders.

At one time I asked the worker why they don't shut down during the prayers and, to my surprise, he seemed to be startled as if that is not possibility. Upon repeating the question the worker told me that it's not possible because many visitors continue to come and expect to be served. “If we don't serve them they will go to our enemies and we will lose people” the worker said jokingly alluding to another café just one building away. That other café also had its fair share of visitors so competition seemed tough even during that special time of Friday noon. Curious as to how local residents feel about this, I asked the worker if there were any complaints about the cafe's operation during the prayers but there seems to have not been a single complaint or remark made in that regards. “Residents often complain about the noise or the extra space we take when the café is fully operational. Sometimes they complain that the café visitors can see inside their houses through windows and balconies but that is all” the worker casually told me. In other words, while missing the Friday prayers is a grave sin and repeated “offense” could amount to heresy as per some interpretations of Islam, the behavior itself is not just tolerated but also considered normal.

Apart from the one time Layth was asked if he was going to the prayers, missing out has never raised

any questions or curiosity as to why he, as many others, prefer to spend the time of Friday prayers smoking rather than observing tradition or religious rituals. This seems to amplify my argument that while particular behavior maybe frowned upon or considered “wrong”, it could be more or less accepted and tolerated so as long no statements are perceived to be made against religion.

4. Visibility: The Regulation of Public Space

The situation is entirely different in another café, just a couple of blocks away, from the first one. The second café is located just in front of the entrance to the mosque where the inside of the mosque is visible. Once the sermon starts no more orders are taken and whichever orders that were already placed are hastily served and the visitors are asked, sometimes rudely, to leave. While most people walking by on their way to the mosque don't look at the café, I've noticed that some others stare for a while at the people sitting. I, and perhaps I am wrong, felt that some people expected the café visitors not to be there or that the café would cease its activities during that time. However, in the many times I visited this café, I noticed that more attention is drawn compared to the first café where almost no one even seems to notice the activity. Furthermore, this café was not nearly as occupied as the other one with sometimes the visitors not exceeding a couple or just slightly more. Interestingly, many times after the prayers ended, many of those praying in the mosque would directly head to the café and start making orders once it resumes its operation.

One time I asked one of the workers there why they shut down the business during the prayers and for a while I thought the look on the worker's face implied that I must be stupid or extremely ignorant. “We can't operate during the prayers, of course!” he proclaimed. “It's haram and would be very disrespectful if there are people sitting with their legs crossed in front of the mosque when people are praying” he added. Upon further questions he told me that they used to operate during the Friday prayers in the past but both some of the local residents as well as the workers complained to the owner and they have, since then, decided to shut down during the prayers. “We don't want to make people upset specially that

we also want to go the prayers ourselves” he told me. After being a regular visitor after at least two handfuls of visits, one of the workers there told me that I could continue to sit and smoke inside the cafe if I wasn't going to the prayers. He, almost apologetically, told me that he would leave enough coal for the Shisha until they're back but that he is going to have to close the door on me because I can't be seen when people come out from the mosque.

This situation seems to highlight an interplay between behavior and attitude where smoking outside in front of the mosque while the prayers are being performed makes an unaccepted statement of disregard and disrespect to religion as well as the religious sensitivities of people who attend the prayers. Once again it seems that society would accept certain behaviors, even if categorized as “wrong” or “haram”, so as long as there is no intention of directly ridiculing or challenging religion. This is made clear by the fact that while both cafés operate in the vicinity of the same mosque and that while both owners want to continue operation during the prayers time, the visibility of the same behavior is perceived differently simply because one café faces the back of the mosque and the other is located directly in front of it. In a sense for the first café facing the back of the mosque, missing out on prayers while smoking or drinking is not perceived to make any statements and, regardless of how wrong, is not nearly as objectionable as behaving the same when people are praying right in front of the visitors. The latter seems to incite a perceived direct disregard and challenge to religion.

The way behavior is negotiated, and whether or not it reflects an objectionable attitude, in terms of locality is quite similar to, and perhaps an extension of, the same logic that tolerates and accepts particular behavior when no justifications or ideological statements are presented. In a sense one could, relatively freely, become an atheist and behave without particular restrictions until he or she “comes-out” and explains why these restrictions were lifted in the first place. This logic doesn't only explain why most of the atheists I've spoken to choose to adopt passing or pretending as a coping mechanism but also highlights the possibility of society's accommodation of alternative lifestyles that doesn't

openly and directly threaten its values and traditions.

5. A Brothel in Disguise: Negotiation of Identity, Behavior and Public Space

While the contrast between the Friday noon operation codes of the two cafés I discussed earlier offers very useful insights on the way the perception of attitude produces acceptance and rejection of particular behavior, the extent to which this negotiation can go was further amplified by my experience in the third and final café I visited. While the other two are relatively cheap and, therefore, visited by both working and upper middle class Egyptians, the third café is significantly more expensive and selective of its visitors.

Hunter invited me a few times over a smoke and coffee in what he considers as one of his favorite places because it is “shady and naughty but not filthy”. Intrigued by what that meant, Hunter told me that upscale prostitutes hangout in that cafe to fish for potential customers. The way business is initiated is entirely dependent on mobile phones where a customer first enables his phone's Bluetooth and writes down his number in the name tab. This way prostitutes would call the customer on his phone to identify him from other visitors and once they do they go sit at his table and negotiate the price. In the few times I've visited the café I've noticed that, indeed, some women move from one table to the other and, sometimes, leave with a different customer each day. I opened my phone's Bluetooth connection a couple of times to see for myself and noticed that many devices were named either with phone numbers or nicknames such as “Alexandrian girlie”, “cute girl” and “sugary girl”. Given the unusual names of the devices, which is a strategy that I am aware of in other places as well as the fact that the same women move from table to table and, sometimes, leave with a different customer each day, I think that it's fair to assume that indeed prostitution is conducted in this cafe. What is not clear to me, however, is how involved the workers or the management is with this operation. It would be naïve to assume that, to say the least, they are not aware of what goes on when I in a few visits was able to clearly connect the dots.

But even if the café's management is involved, I asked myself how do the workers feel about it? From what I could tell from their relaxed facial expressions and the friendliness the workers display to these women, they are somewhat accepting, if not complacent, to the kind of business that takes place under their watch. I've deliberately visited this cafe on weekday noon hours to compare it with operation during Friday prayers. On weekdays and prior to the prayers on Friday the TV blasts Egyptian pop music and I could hear saucy laughter and playful giggles from all around the place. The place is very vibrant and busy which is unusual for any cafe operating during the noon when most typical café visitors are at college or work. The scene is quite similar in Friday mornings until the first call to the Friday prayers. The TV channels that play non-stop music are switched to Qur'an recitations and the live national TV coverage of the Friday prayers. Suddenly there are no giggles, no laughter and no women jumping from one table to the other, it just becomes eerily quiet. In the background I could hear the manager rushing workers to finish their errands so as to catch the prayers before the sermon ends. A few moments later the waiter notified us that, while we can stay, no orders will be served until they come back from the prayers. The whole scene became even odder to me than it already was since out of all places one wouldn't expect a café that facilitates prostitution would be so adamant of observing religious rituals. Nevertheless, I conceded and remained at my seat to the obvious annoyance of the couple of workers who stayed behind to watch over the place.

At this point I wanted to put more coal on my shisha because I couldn't drag anymore smoke and since I was told that there will be no one to serve me I went to the spot where the coal is kept and took some to where I was sitting. One of the workers who was left behind to watch over the place during the prayers frantically jumped in the way and frustratingly told me that I can't serve myself. The reason he gave me wasn't that I am, understandably, trespassing on the worker's duties or using the café's equipment without authorization but rather that it's the management policy that no service will be offered during the Friday prayers. Skeptical of the worker's excuse he showed me a printed note placed

in a neat hard plastic cover that states that “We apologize. No service will be offered during the Friday prayers” and advised me to wait until his colleagues come back.

This could be perceived as a rather absurd situation which Hunter thought made no sense and is “just plain stupid and hypocritical”. However, we've already observed in this research that if an attitude is perceived to be exceptionally and directly undermining of religiosity or tradition particular behaviors are not accepted or tolerated. In this case I was disregarding reverence and respect of religion by wanting to smoke when the prayers is being performed despite the fact that the place is literally a brothel incognito. These rules apply to everyone and are observed, of all people, by the prostitutes who seize their activities during the Friday prayers. What I am trying to argue is that negotiations of accepted behavior could, even if bizarrely, go to extreme length if particular standards that define proper attitude towards religion are not crossed. The situation reminded me of Hunter's assertion that believers could behave the same way of atheists who lift religious restrictions on themselves out of the belief that they hold a “ticket for salvation and redemption” once they decide to stop. However, these same people would be dismayed and shocked if an atheist justifies his behavior on non-theistic grounds or out of announced disregard of religion.

6. Being Atheist in Egypt: The (Im)pious City

Based on the literature I've discussed earlier we can conceptualize the city as not merely the architecture and design but also, and more importantly, as a space that is expressive of social relations, political economy, class divisions and religion. In other words, the city becomes a space for the negotiations of the contradictions of culture, and particularly value systems, as well as economic arrangements and religion. Levy and Parish conceptualize the “sacred city” where observance to religious value systems and beliefs as well as their embodiment is central to civic life. The conceptualization of the sacred city, however, leaves a coinciding and mutually exclusive aspect of organizing civil life around the observance and embodiment of religious values and systems. As

observed earlier the differences in the operation of the two adjacent cafés during the Friday prayers highlights the ways by which observance of religious values is negotiated and expressed. While one café continues its activity during the prayers, the other café is forced to cease its operation until the Friday rituals are performed simply because it directly faces the entrance to the local mosque. This implies that impiety is facilitated and embedded within the orchestration of civil life by the embodiment and observance of religious systems and values. In other words, impiety is facilitated by the religiously based regulation of public space just as individual impious behaviour is accepted and understood as per underlining religious values so as long as no threat or explicit challenge to religion is perceived. In a sense, we can't fully understand the sacred or pious city without also accounting for the underlining and mutual operation of the impious city.

This is significantly relevant to understanding being atheist in Egypt. As expressed by most of my interlocutors, “coming out” as an atheist is not necessary since, in practice, they can move on and advance with their desired lifestyle and observe their social and economic interests without necessarily putting themselves “out there” and, consequently, having to deal with ridicule, discrimination and quite possibly legal prosecution. The negotiation of religious identity and behaviour in the public space, largely by a majority of individuals who self-identify as Muslims, is both equally observable and employable by Egyptian atheists. Accordingly, being atheist in Egypt, or at least its involvement with impious behaviour and alternative lifestyles becomes less distinctive and more organic within contexts where almost everyone else is involved in the process of identity and behaviour negotiation.

Verily, this is in turn contextual and comes with variant degrees in intensity where, for example, smoking shisha during the Friday prayers maybe permitted but consumption of alcohol remains to be banned and not allowed.

7. Religion and Atheism: between Belief and Practice

The prevalence of the accommodative social code that allows impiety calls into question clear-cut

distinctions between belief and practice. On the one hand impious behavior could be, at least loosely, accommodated if it is not perceived as a conscious or direct threat to religious belief. On the other hand display of piety is a barometer and an articulation of belief. In other words, religion is neither strictly just a system of belief nor a model of social conduct. Consequently, conceptualizing religion does not need to fall within a tension between uncompromising approaches to religion where it's either a metaphysical and symbolic understanding of the world or a power-driven social institution that shapes and is shaped by the sociopolitical context. Instead I am proposing that the religious experience, and by extension atheism, is significantly fluid that it renders such binaries obsolete.

In other words, at given contexts when the accommodative code is operable, atheism and religiosity as a binary are incomplete and void analytical categories of behavior. In a sense, at such contexts, individuals are not either atheists or believers but are rather active negotiators of terms of social placement, regulation and cultural embodiment vis-à-vis their desires, values and beliefs.

The imbrication of belief and behavior in relation to the accommodative social code incites us to think of the employment of such strategies by atheists as a byproduct of an already established need to accommodate expressions of impiety of society itself. It's precisely at this accommodative flexibility of social order that the bulwarks of biopower, subjectivity and the regimes of truth are contested. This is not to say that power is escapable because the accommodative social code is, by itself, a form of regulation and control. What I am arguing instead is to conceptualize power as a dialectical force that corresponds to both state or social agendas and individualistic desires. Therefore, in a sense, atheism is both resistance to and an organic expression of religious discourse because neither impiety nor piety can be conceptualized without the other.

The analysis of my interlocutors' pathway to atheism demonstrates that indeed along the pathway religion operates as a symbol of meaning, as Geertz argues, which is exemplified in the relentless effort and expectations to "feel something". Rituals, as a subset of symbols, as in the case of Helios and

Alison's experience with the Omra or the prevalence of a sense of disconnection from religion among my interlocutors, are designed and expected to invoke particular emotions and moods that are translated into human action and dispositions. This is not to say or to dismiss that these expectations or the particular meanings embedded within religious symbols are not contextually shaped or correspond to power. Indeed the rejection or reluctance to behave as expected clearly reveals that, as Asad argues, religion is not a separate aspect of social life and is rather imbricated with social, political and economic power relations. The cutting and burning of Grace's clothes, the medication imposed on Jackson, the dismay of Joe's colleagues with his drinking, Layth's repulsion of categorizing his mother as deficient and corrupted and the crackdown of the state on individuals who challenge religion, to name a few, all highlight that a separation between beliefs and practice or symbols and power is conceptually flawed.

8. Concluding Remarks

It became increasingly apparent that while the Egyptian society has high regards to religion and that it, accordingly, largely organizes civil life around it, there are also socially sanctioned simultaneous strategies and possibilities to escape regulations and restrictions. Therefore, while public space is a site of cultural formation and expression of society's values and beliefs, it could also be perceived as a field for identity negotiation and escape. Some of my interlocutors, who recognize and understand the mechanisms by which society regulates its regulation, often capitalize on these strategies to enjoy a relatively greater freedom and to learn and practice ways by which they can improve their coping mechanisms.

More importantly observing these strategies allows us to further understand how cultural hybridity is materialized in public space and, accordingly, at least partially explain how and why alternative lifestyles are approachable, appealing and conceived as a possibility. In a sense, what I am arguing is that impiety is as normative and organic as religiosity in Egypt and that, by extension, atheism and

particularly its implications on adopting alternative lifestyles is one of the many possibilities that “being Egyptian” allows. There is a silver lining to observed, however, which is the accommodative social code by which this strategy operates; impiety is often accommodated and accepted so as long it's not perceived as a conscious and ideologically justified challenge to religion.

Chapter Six

The Egyptian State and Atheists: The Straw-man

1. Introduction

The state's official campaign to battle atheism and the occasional prosecution of Egyptian atheists is presented in terms of the state's duty to safeguard Islam and to protect its citizens from dangerous and damaging ideas. This seemingly spiritual and religious endeavor, however, is underlined by political and social variables that are heavily imbricated with religion. This is a point that we keep coming back to since at almost every turn we've taken in this research religion was heavily involved with other institutional and cultural elements in the public sphere. In this chapter I aim to analyze the state's interest in categorizing and prosecuting Egyptian atheists in relation to its historically rooted interdependent relation with official religious institution and also in relation to the current political climate.

2. The State and Religion: Conceptualizing Interdependence

If the state is, at least to some extent, synonymous with governance, it could be assumed that it has existed for as long as humans existed. Verily the concept of modern states was conceived much later in human history around the 18th century but governance, one of the ultimate functions of the state, has long been established as a need for human societies for as far back in history as we can examine. In that sense the common denominator to all phases and developments of the state is both exercising control and maintaining some kind of an order that is necessary to human survival.

Issawi (1987) argues that "a society without a state is wellnigh impossible" if people's conflict of interests due to the scarcity of resources or the complex details of everyday interaction are not kept in check. Issawi's contention echoes a philosophical negative outlook on the nature of human existence and human nature. There is an established perception in political thought and philosophy that there is a need to keep people from each other and that, inevitably, any society will crumble upon itself if

individuals are not governed and controlled. This perception characterizes human nature with innate self-defeating attributes that must be kept in check. Machiavelli, for instance, contends that particular characteristics are innate in human nature and that humans are largely “self-interested” and are quick to become spiteful, wretched, selfish and dishonest during times of conflict (Machiavelli and Bull, 95-97). Continuing that line of thinking, Thomas Hobbes declared that the “state of nature” of mankind without restraints is nasty, short and brute (Held, 69). In effect, a social contract and rule by an absolute powerful sovereign, according to Hobbes, is the only way the ramifications of this state of nature could be averted. This view could be contrasted with Jean Jacques Rousseau who maintained, contrary to Hobbes, that humans originally were “noble savages” and that the chaining grip of civilization is what turns them into “beasts” (Held, 71). Nevertheless, while acquitting humanity from innate and inevitable evil, Rousseau also seems to acknowledge that particular social and political arrangements can produce tyranny, misfortune and repression. In that sense the necessity of the state as an intervening regulatory power is also, at least practically, implied. After all, under the human rights discourse and international treaties of the United Nations, states are delegated to protect and be held accountable to protecting the rights and liberties of its citizens.

However, even the most powerful absolute sovereign cannot rule and regulate the interaction between its subjects or citizens without legitimacy and a relative acceptance by the people governed to a model of governance. More importantly governance cannot be exercised without the people exercising and embodying a sense of social solidarity. Nomadic and tribal societies, for example, based social solidarity on kinship because blood ties have “a force binding on most men” (Issawi, 106). This force motivates people to guard their impulse, cooperate and fear dishonor if they resort to violence to settle disagreements, seek their interests or end conflicts. This system operated in a way that quelled in-group aggression based on respect attributed to prestigious chieftains and the elderly. Additionally this system deterred out-group violence with the might of brave and powerful young men (106).

Social solidarity was later inspired by the ruler's proclaimed divine right to rule as more villages and tribes were integrated under a single banner of a monarch. Religion had not only legitimized the sovereign's power but also served as the common characteristic, common life and common values that reinforce social solidarity. The importance of religion's power to unite tribes and villages is conceived based on the idea that "proximity is the basis of solidarity" where the sovereign's expansion of his territory eventually caused social solidarity to wane (Issawi, 105). That was particularly true with the move from village to city life where kinship and blood ties weakened or disintegrated and, consequently, social solidarity required something different to cement it. Issawi argues that "religion reinforces the power which a state has already acquired from its solidarity and numbers" where religion can attempt to obliterate potential conflicts between subjects of the state and, instead, turn them towards a common notion of truth, common desire and purpose (Issawi, 131).

3. The State and Al-Azhar: An Uneasy Alliance

The modern Egyptian state has particularly maintained the aforementioned reciprocal relationship with religion. The path through which the interdependence of the state and official religious institutions was weaved renders the binaries of religion and the state as well as modernity and Islam obsolete. In fact, for the most part, the modern Egyptian state and religious institutions have been conveniently imbricated in a way that neither would adequately survive political disturbances and social changes without the other. In that sense religion is a particularly lucrative tool for the state to maintain its power and to legitimize its authority.

In this regard it's important to realize that the Egyptian state and consecutive modern regimes found themselves in a dire renegotiation of boundaries with religious institutions to ensure their legitimacy, control and, hence, their survival. For example, against the social outreach and political power of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the influence of the Saudi regime, President Nasser attempted to acquire the religious legitimacy of Al-Azhar and its scholars. Nasser's goal was to both counterpoise

the religious appeal of his opponents and to justify his socialist and foreign policies by, at least partially, invoking the state's brand of religion in the public debate. Nasser, accordingly, launched a series of reforms aimed at bringing the most supreme and revered religious institution under the banner of his state. These reforms included nationalizing endowments in 1952, which effectively stripped Al-Azhar from economic autonomy, excluding scholars from the judicial body in 1955 and modernizing the curriculum taught in Al-Azhar by including natural and applied sciences (Zeghal, 375). These reforms aimed at controlling religion and befitting it to the regime's needs with neither obliterating it from the public sphere or over empowering it; both of which Nasser's regime could have not afforded. But if indeed the relationship between the state and religion is reciprocal as I've argued earlier, how could such control and appropriation be fathomed Zeghal argues that religious scholars and institutions' influence was not subsided but was rather dormant amidst the overwhelming popularity of Nasser, the repression of his opponents and the rise of Arab nationalism (374). The defeat against Israel in the 1967 war proved to be a significant turning point and an opportunity for religious scholars and institutions to assert their relevance and exceptional importance to the nation and public affairs especially during the times of crisis.

This overturn could be seen in Sadat's reliance on religious scholars to help him eliminate Nasserite left wing opposition given his strategies of liberalizing the economy as well as moving from the Soviet block and approaching the United States. Consequently, reciprocity was more profound in the relationship between the state under Sadat and religious institutions as the former needed to counter Arab nationalism and socialism by undermining their religious legitimacy. Al-Azhar was quick and adamant to adapt to changes in the political context and to seize the opportunity to become more relevant and central to Egypt's politics after years of submission to Nasser's regime. In 1972, following student demonstrations opposing Sadat, Muhammad Fahham then Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, proclaimed that leftists were unbelievers and, hence, must repent. This line of religious rhetoric was

adopted by the state propaganda machines where communism and socialism became synonyms to impiety and blasphemy (Zeghal, 382). Sadat's legitimacy in a sense, therefore, owed official religious institutions much more than Nasser regime ever did which led to Al-Azhar enjoying both the benefits of being part of the state bureaucracy and a considerable degree of political power that had been denied before.

That is not to say that a turbulence in the state's relationship with religious institutions was not imminent as Al-Azhar's new found power meant that disagreements with Sadat would become less opaque. In 1974 Sadat, who was not comfortable with Al-Azhar's demands to completely transform Egypt's legal system to Islamic Sharia, issued a decree that gave the minister of endowments all the powers of the Grand Sheikh of Azhar. While that decree was later withdrawn, it nevertheless marked a significant crisis as Sadat obviously realized that the same power that bolstered his legitimacy was also one that could potentially undermine his rule. In 1976, Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar Abdul-Halim Mahmoud sent a letter to the president of the Parliament calling for the enforcement of Sharia given that “Islam is not an issue to be considered or put at the mercy of discussion in the name of democracy” (384). This ongoing political onslaught between the state and its religious institutions was largely put to a halt by the rise of another force brewed in the relatively liberalized political scene of Sadat's Egypt. Other Islamic factions such as the reemerging Muslim Brotherhood, *Takfir wal Hijra* and prominent religious figures that did not fall under Al-Azhar's control started to invade Al-Azhar's monopoly over Islamic discourse. However, it was the militant aspect of *Takfir wal Hijra* that forced Al-Azhar and the Ministry of Endowments to bolster their relationship with the state once more as not only was their monopoly over the religious discourse jeopardized but also the safety of their own lives.

In 1977, sheikh Dhahaby, a former minister of Endowments, was assassinated by *Takfir wal Hijra* which is an event that highlighted many disturbing facts to both the state and its official religious institutions. Firstly, a new wave of Islamic groups and understanding of Islam was unraveling

independently from formal religious education and instruction. Secondly, these groups were not only discontent with the official religious institutions' submission to the consecutive regimes but also motivated to actively and violently target their representatives. The emergence of independent Islamic groups and the assassination of sheikh Dhahaby, Zeghal argues, pinpointed once more official state scholars as "religious spokesmen for the regime" and, hence, becoming forevermore involved with political action without being in "the center of political arena" (385).

The mutual antagonism between Al-Azhar and the state towards militant Islamic factions as well as the Muslim Brotherhood would continue to define the relationship between the state and its official religious institutions throughout what remained of Sadat's days in power and the three decades of Mubarak's rule. In the aftermath of Sadat's assassination by militant Islamists as well as the waves of terrorism during the 1990s, Mubarak's regime needed Al-Azhar to support its crackdown on radical Islam and in return was forced to heed to Al-Azhar's demands of further Islamizing Egypt (Zeghal, 386). In addition, Mubarak's regime lacked a unique claim on legitimacy as the support for Arab Socialism dwindled leaving Mubarak's regime devoid of an ideology that is capable of winning the sympathy and support from the masses. In consequence, Mubarak was in a very difficult ideological struggle with Islamist factions that attempted to rally supporters over claims of religious legitimacy which perhaps was the only remaining clear and viable alternative to a population that became largely disenchanted with modernity, secularism and socialism.

This political context forced Mubarak's regime to urgently seek Al-Azhar's support of its policies and crackdown on Islamists. In return, Al-Azhar was given more space in the political arena as well as control of all private mosques in 2002 which served as recruiting grounds for Islamists and particularly radical Islamic factions (Barraclough, 239). The state's delegation of Al-Azhar to counter the ideas of radical Islam, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi movements granted it an unprecedented autonomy in a political context where the "ideological emptiness of state power" was becoming more

and more apparent and more troublesome for Mubarak's regime (ibid). This autonomy could be highlighted with Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar Gad Al-Haq's critique of the state's attempts to control religion, the role of the media which he perceived to attack Islam and the "moral dissolution of secularists" as Al-Haq put it (240). Secular intellectuals and artists in particular became the target of Al-Azhar whom they accused of propagating impiety and hostility towards Islamic mores. Cases against intellectuals such as Nawal El Saadawi, Nasr Hamed Abu-Zeid and Ahmed Sobhi Mansour as well as the assassination of Farag Fouda and the failed assassination attempt of Naguib Mahfouz showcased the rising hostility towards dissidents of mainstream religious discourse and the rise of Al-Azhar's role in Egypt's political and social sphere.

In summary, Al-Azhar went through a repressive phase of dormant co-option within the state under Nasser which was largely elevated under Sadat and then to a large degree of autonomy and relevance to the political arena in Mubarak's state. Nevertheless, at all times it seems that Al-Azhar and the state were interdependent since the Egyptian state has almost always required Al-Azhar to give it religious legitimacy. In return Al-Azhar benefited from state funding and legislation to preserve its attempts to monopolize religious discourses and bolster its weight in the political arena. Accordingly, it is not odd to have witnessed the grand Imam of Al-Azhar and the Egyptian pope on the center stage among representatives of other political groups when, then defense minister, Abdul-Fattah Al-Sisi announced on live television the ouster of Islamist president Morsi on July 2013.

The official religious institutions' support of the current regime and the autocratic rulers before stems from a long practiced and embedded reciprocal relationship between the state and religious institutions. In short, removing the Muslim Brotherhood from power and hostility towards Islamism in general is not necessarily a trade for an otherwise secular, progressive and liberal state but rather a maintenance of the already established imbrication of state and religion. Accordingly, while the state maybe suspicious or hostile towards Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood, it's equally invested in its own

brand of Islam that is not necessarily tolerant of any dissent or challenge of state approved religious discourse.

Based on this juxtaposition of both state and religion we can begin to understand not only why Egyptian atheists are targeted by the state but also why Muslim reformists who contend mainstream religious discourse are sometimes accused with similar charges of defamation of religion. Therefore, defamation of religion charges could be seen as both a strategic tool to control mainstream religious discourses and an appeasement to state run religious institutions that are angered and threatened by dissidence to their interpretation of Islam. This strategy is dictated by Al-Sisi's inheritance of a state that is suffering from ideological emptiness, threats from Islamist opposition and religious insurgency.

4. The Egyptian State and Atheists: A State of Exception

The most recent Egyptian constitution of 2014 declares in article (64) that “freedom of belief is absolute” and, thus, a question is begged to be answered; how come is it then that the Egyptian state invests in organized campaigns against atheism and that atheists find themselves under the scrutiny of the law? If freedom of religion is acknowledged as an absolute basic civil liberty by the constitution on which judicial bases are Egyptian atheists arrested and put on trial?

Anthropologists and political theorists have observed that exceptional measures are often consequent to political crisis such as insurgency, violent internal conflicts and wars. Following the ouster of president Morsi, insurgency in the already troubled Sinai Peninsula significantly increased resulting in violent attacks against security forces that left dozens of security personnel dead and injured. State sovereignty is violently and systematically challenged in Sinai as well as in others parts of Egypt including the capital where several check points, police stations, and the infrastructure are targeted and attacked. Furthermore, dissidence to the current political regime by Islamists and other groups including football club supporters known as Ultras, revolutionary youth movements and various political forces is, despite the violent and legal crackdown, rampant with no viable political solution in sight. Such political crisis

incites exceptional political measures that impose a “state of exception” that represents a “point of imbalance between political fact and political law” (Agmaben, 1). In other words, the suspension of civil liberties such as freedom of belief, could not be understood by the law and is rather observed as a mere fact of the current political order that is independent of the law and the constitution. For example, after assuming power on February 1933, Adolf Hitler proclaimed a decree to protect the state and the people where constitutional articles regarding political liberties were suspended and in immediate effect any threat from potential dissidents or challengers was preemptively neutralized. Similarly the USA Patriot Act which was issued by the U.S. Senate on October 2001 following the September 11 attacks authorized and legitimized the attorney general's power to detain aliens suspected of being affiliated with organizations or engagement in activities that “threaten the national security of the United States”. Agmaben argues that the patriot act which suspends constitutional rights of due process produced “legally unnamable and unclassifiable beings” who were stripped from any legal status recognized by American laws since they are “neither prisoners nor persons accused but rather detainees” (3).

While Egyptian atheists are still recognized as citizens it's important to note that the state of exception is a pattern rather than a template that manifests itself identically in different political and social contexts. In that sense, Egyptian atheists are casted in the limbo of the state of exception where some and not all of their constitutional rights are suspended. Their citizenship, however, is obviously contested by state propaganda, as manifested in the national campaign against atheism, which proclaims that atheism is synonymous to the “erosion of moral values, spread of crime, psychological disturbance, suicide, depression and disintegration of families”. In other words, the Egyptian state is declaring that being atheist is inevitably and uncompromisingly the antithesis of good citizenship. Agmaben argues that this obscure state of exception, where the lines between the public law and political life are blurred, characterizes and defines “modern totalitarianism” which “allows for the

physical elimination of not only political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system” (Agamben, 2).

But why is the state uninterested in integrating atheists in the political and social system? After all the current Egyptian regime builds a great deal of its legitimacy on a political discourse centered around “fighting terrorism” and protecting the Egyptian identity from Islamism so wouldn't it be pragmatic and practical not to antagonize a subgroup of Egyptian secularists who, more or less, agree on at least one particular article of the state's political agenda?

The state's protection of its religious institutions' monopoly over religious discourse does not solely explain the prosecution of Egyptian atheists. In fact, with regards to stifling free speech, Egyptian atheists are a minority among many other categories of Egyptians whose civil liberties are restricted. However, the state has as a matter of fact singled out atheists as a category or a “phenomenon” that requires immediate attention and action from its ideological apparatuses.

5. The Egyptian State and Atheists: Moral Panic and the Savage Slot

Just as times of political crisis almost always incurs a state of exception for one or more categories of people, such a state of exception immediately induces a moral panic surrounding said categories.

Whether or not the outcry against Egyptian atheists on private TV channels is organic (meaning that it's an independent reaction to more atheists exposing their ideas on the public space) or incited by the state is not possible to be clearly separated and determined. There are, however, enough precedents in the past to assume that the state is employing quite a familiar tactic to white wash its hostility towards Islamism.

In the 1990s Egypt adopted conservative social measures to “outflank” Egyptian Islamists' religious claims and credentials who were being targeted by the security apparatuses in response to increase in terrorist activities (Dalacoura 45). In fear of being accused of being non-Islamic as the state intensified its crackdown on terrorist and militant groups the Egyptian government led a waves of arrests against

heavy metal music fans in 1996 whom it accused of being “Satanists” and, thus, “contemptuous to religion”. This was the culmination of various reports and investigative stories allegedly reporting “horrors” from underground metal gigs such as indulging in sex parties, sacrificing animals, drinking blood and worshipping the devil. While none of these charges stood to scrutiny by Egypt's General Prosecution, the buzz this case created almost immediately positioned the state as the guardian of public morals and proper religious faith. This shocking case to the Egyptian public highlighted Al-Azhar's role as the vanguard of the Islamic faith in Egypt in what may have been a subtle reminder of its importance amid competition from various Islamist groups.

A few years later, on May 2001 a few dozen men were arrested out of suspicion of participating in homosexual activity. The defendants were accused of debauchery and contempt to religion since the Egyptian law does not recognize or outlaw homosexuality. The state lavished in an “unprecedented media campaign” that emphasized publicizing the arrests, the trials and information of the defendants (Franke, 11). The more the details about the case were released and produced, the greater was the interest and coverage of the media. Consequently, the infamous Queen Boat incident, where dozens of individuals were arrested on suspicions of engaging in homosexuality, was rendered as one of the most significant public issue of 2001. The outcome was that Mubarak's regime was successful in setting a stage for an intriguing public distraction at time of economic crisis, reemphasizing the state's role as the vanguard of public morals and hence, implicitly, justifying repression of Islamist activism and stifling Islamist claims (Franke, 21).

Sisi's regime faces a similar situation to that of Mubarak in the 1990s and early 2000s. The extremely violent repression of Islamists as well as the violent armed struggle with militants in Sinai and terrorist groups in Cairo, an assertion of the state's religiosity is necessary to maintain the state's religious legitimacy. The prosecution of Egyptian atheists is suspiciously similar to that of heavy metal fans and homosexuals as they could easily be singled out, fashioned and represented in the most horrific ways to

the public; savages who are inherently and fundamentally different than the rest of Egyptians and the morals and ideals by which the Egyptian state presumably stands to zealously protect. Furthermore, the representation of Egyptian atheists and highlighting them as a grotesque abomination inversely mirrors everything a good Egyptian citizen needs to be.

The most important aspect of categorizing Egyptian atheists is that it immediately summons the need to define what a good Egyptian ought to be with religion at the center and, obviously, the state's religious institutions as the caregivers and dispensers of truth. It's in this particular juxtaposition of political strategies and public hostility towards freedom of religion that Egyptian atheists are conveniently situated in the savage-slot not as mere enemies of the state and the public but also as a constraining tool for legitimizing state oppression, monopoly over religious knowledge and state legitimacy.

Furthermore, the state's need to define the "good citizenship" highlights its hostility towards any perceived resistance to the regime of truth it seeks to maintain and reproduce. Atheism, just like alternative unsanctioned religious discourses, pinpoints a crack in its desired formation of social order. After all, because the state's religious discourse justifies its power and control, undermining religion is perceived as a threat and an act of dissent towards it.

This is not to say that Egyptian atheists necessarily think of themselves as agents of social change or think of atheism as a conscious resistance to the state. In fact, almost all of my interlocutors have expressed that they are neither interested in political activism nor advocacy of their rights as atheists. The question is could the state be overreacting or expressing an unwarranted paranoia with regards to the consequences of a slim fraction of its citizens developing an atheist identity? It's precisely because of the improbability of atheism becoming a significant challenger to social order and the regimes of truth that the state's reaction to atheism in Egypt should be contextualized within a broader hostility towards any sort of perceived dissent to its attempts to monopolize the public discourse. Consider, for example, the increased powers the state is delegating to its institutions and official syndicates to

regulate and control the Internet, art, religious discourses and the media. While atheism has been put on the pedestal of social inquisition, it's not in an exceptional confrontation with the state. In other words, the state's crackdown and prosecution of atheists is part of a larger and elaborate scheme to reinforce and bolster state power.

6. Concluding Remarks

To understand the state's prosecution and propaganda against Egyptian atheists we need to first observe two factors. First, the State is not merely acting on its own accord but rather complies with negative public opinion towards apostasy and freedom of religion. Therefore, by "battling atheism" and prosecuting atheists, given the general negative sentiment towards freedom of religion by the public, the state is performing its duty and expected role to "safeguard" Islamic values and beliefs.

Furthermore, with the diminishing influence of the family as social and state agent to introduce and recreate social order and value-systems, as we've observed in chapter two, the state is attempting to counter the family's dysfunction in that regards. This is most certainly only aggravated by the threat globalization and cyberspace imposes to the social order and value-systems the state seeks to install and recreate. In a sense, the state's prosecution of atheists could be perceived as legal and political resistance to open spaces and international pressure to abide by western models of state-citizen relationship. Second, the prosecution of Egyptian atheists reflects the state's political agenda in response to the explosive ramifications of January 2011 uprising and particularly its attempt to redefine Egyptians as obedient, well-behaved and pious citizens. Accordingly, the propaganda that conceptualizes atheists as immoral, dangerous and, more importantly, "un-Egyptian" is made to contrast the qualities that the state desires, recognizes and presents as the "good citizen".

Furthermore, because "good citizenship" is framed by the state's version of "legitimate Islam", propaganda against atheism is not only a way for the state to advance its political agenda but also to both assert its religiosity as well as the legitimacy and the need for official state-run religious

institutions. This is particularly important to account for given the aftermath of removing the Muslim Brotherhood's man from presidency in July 2013 and particularly the Islamist's propaganda that the current regime is at war with Islam. In short, what I am trying to establish and argue in this chapter is that the prosecution, marginalization and stigmatizing of Egyptian atheists should not be merely analyzed socially and culturally. Instead, atheism in Egypt, should also be perceived as a mirror that reflects an increasingly volatile and historically established political context.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

1. Summary

The aim of this research has been to both explain why some Egyptians turn to atheism and to explore the different ways by which they manage the stigma associated with their identity in their daily lives. In Chapter Two through the discussion of the literature on religious socialization and identity formation we've identified an overarching assumption that families where religion is not central to their values and daily lives predispose children to apostasy. While this has indeed been the case for three of my interlocutors, the remaining six have recalled that religious socialization was central in their childhood with varying degrees of intensity. In attempting to explain why some of the individuals who are heavily religiously socialized turn into atheism we've identified two possible explanations. First, there are pervasive cultural influences outside the family that overpower religious socialization. Second, strict religious socialization may often lead to conflicts where it backfires as the individuals seek to resist and confront their family's control which is often materialized in abandoning religion altogether. Through our analysis we've identified cases where the body was the "battlefield" between religious cultural formation and the desire for alternative lifestyles or the adoption of non-theistic world-views. Chapter two, however, left us with a gap and a significant unanswered question; where do these outside influences come from and how come they are so pervasive? I've attempted to answer this question in chapter three by looking at ways globalization has impacted the broader culture where both the imaginableness and appeal of alternative lifestyles and world-views becomes pervasive and conceivable. As discussed in my interlocutors' accounts, the heavy consumption of western cultural products and bilingual education are staples of upper middle class Egyptian families and many have, indeed, reported that it had a significant influence on their desires and perceptions of the world. Furthermore, the access to cyberspace has allowed many of my interlocutors to access information,

literature and ideas that are otherwise restricted or even banned. In chapter four we've moved the discussion from exploring how my interlocutors became atheists into how they have developed different ways to manage this identities. Based on some of the literature on atheism as a social experience, which was later confirmed through some of interlocutors' cases, there two basic coping mechanisms; passing and affirmation. The former involves social behavior and responses that doesn't give away information about their identity while trying at the same time to avert social pressure and questioning. The latter involves an outspoken attitude where only a couple of my interlocutors have reported occasionally adopting if their social status permitted it or if it was absolutely necessary to assert their identity to resolve a particular conflict. In addition to these modes, my interlocutors have also revealed a third coping mechanism that I've not encountered in my research which is to temporarily adopt a religious persona either physically by performing rituals or, more significantly, verbally to imply a religious identity. The significance of the latter is that it generates a reaction where public expression of impiety and irreligiosity is accepted and accommodated so as long as adherence to religion, despite not observing it in practice, is subtly implied. I've identified this as a code by which society has learned to accommodate alternative lifestyles and behavior where impiety is relatively accepted so as long as it is not perceived as a conscious and deliberate challenge to religion. In chapter five, to further understand how my interlocutors manage their identity in different social settings, I've examined public space as a social frontier of religious cultural formation and negotiation of religious identities in relation to “the code”. Accordingly, I visited three local cafés where some of my interlocutors hangout during the Friday prayers and observed their operation ethics during the prayers. There is one main pivotal observation that I've made; operation ethics are orchestrated by a sense of observance of the sacredness of religion. However, while that may seem to imply that all cafés would shut down during the prayers, it instead meant that observance of religion could be negotiated in a way that allows operation during the prayers and particularly in relation to visibility from within the

mosque. The café that was close but not visible from the mosque continued its operation normally while the other that was directly facing it had to shut down during the prayers so as not to “disrespect religion”. Because operating during the Friday prayers and in opposition of the mosque would be perceived as deliberate disrespect and disregard of religion, the café owner cannot accommodate individuals who, despite being Muslims themselves, don't want to perform these rituals. I concluded my research and analysis in chapter six by attempting to explain why the state has categorized Egyptian atheists as a threat. Firstly, by doing that, the state is assuming its expected role to “safeguard” Islam particularly in a social context where hostility towards freedom of religion is abundant. Secondly, the state is responding to a volatile political context where it needs to redefine “good citizens” and assert its own religiosity by marginalizing and silver lining atheists at the antithesis of being Egyptian.

2. Deduction

Despite the state's propaganda and social outcry, it makes no sense to speak in terms of a binary of authentic Egyptian identities and an alien or western ones that are imposed on Egyptians. Developing an atheist identity in Egypt is as organic as the development of any other identity and particularly religious ones. After all, most of the pathways to atheism that we've encountered were marked by some kind of critical life events, personal qualities, perks of socioeconomic statuses, familial relationships, variance in strictness of familial religious orientation, resistance, exposure to western cultural products which is normalized and integrated within religious socialization and access to the Internet. These overlapping and imbricated values are too complex and interdependent to neatly separate them from an imagined singular overarching tenet of “being Egyptian”. This is further exemplified by the strategies and methods by which religious identity and social expectations of behavior are negotiated to accommodate alternative lifestyles and desired behaviors that don't necessarily conform to orthodoxy.

3. Limitations of the Research

I've mainly relied on the accounts of my interlocutors in my research. In the end, despite goodwill and

willingness to cooperate, these accounts are present time recollections of sporadic and fragmented memories. As with most anthropological research employing an investigation on life histories, it is very important to acknowledge that some important details may not be captured or even realized by the interlocutors. In other words, there might have been overlooked stories and details that might have made revelation with significant implications. In addition because it was initially difficult for me to find participants outside my social circle, I've primarily relied on snowball sampling. Consequently, my research is primarily on upper middle class Egyptian atheists. Accordingly, I don't claim to represent or account for all Egyptian atheists or even for upper middle class Egyptian atheists. As was revealed in the research, the pathway to atheism responds to both social, economic and political context as it also responds to critical and individual life events. I project that further research which could include more accounts and particularly those in a different social class would have significantly different implications on our understanding of being and becoming atheist in Egypt.

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